
Sharing in the Digital Age: Two (very different) cases

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Abstract

Sharing is a very poorly understood concept within academia in general, but a few attempts has been made to clarify the concept of sharing in a digitally connected world. This paper reviews two of these attempts and then applies these conceptualizations on two cases of sharing, which the author is currently studying. The first of these cases is a local social enterprise in Newcastle Upon Tyne called Recyke y'Bike, which is involved with recycling of used bikes and a whole range of local community activities based on this. And the other case is sharing within Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) development and how this relate to norms of citizenship.

Keywords

Sharing; Free and Open Source; Citizenship

Introduction

Before we start to talk about how to design to support sharing and how our designs can contribute to local communities and sustainable citizenship, we need to be clear about what we actually mean by *sharing*. What distinguish sharing from other means of distribution? And is sharing just a means of distribution or does it involve other aspects as well?

While Yochai Benker and others have written academically about the sharing economy of production [3] and 'collaborative consumption' is an emerging

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theme within popular books and magazines [4], few academics have attempted to conceptualize and define *sharing* by itself [2,7]. Anthropologists have described sharing practices among gatherer-hunter societies, but without clarifying what they actually mean when they talk about sharing [2].

In this paper I will first review two exceptions to this lack of attention given to the concept of sharing; two proposals on how to understand the concept of sharing. Following this, I will briefly introduce two research projects that I am currently working on, which both involves sharing in different ways.

What is *Sharing*?

Nicholas A. John is one of the few scholars who has tried to conceptualize sharing in relation to digital media and more specifically Web 2.0 [7]. He argues that social network sites (SNS) has broadened the meaning of sharing and that "...*sharing has become the word of choice to describe the way in which we participate in Web 2.0...*" [7:178]. This broadened use of the word in a SNS context is based on the traditional *distributive* and *communicative* meanings of the word. Distributive meanings of sharing either describe the division of something or having something in common, whether that be concrete, physical objects and places or more abstract objects such as interests, fate, beliefs or culture. Communicative meanings of the word, on the other hand, refers to imparting others in one's experiences such as when someone shares their feelings or emotions with someone else.

John identifies a shift in how SNS has begun to use the word – especially since 2005-7 – to refer to all kinds of activities we engage in when participating in SNS. The most obvious example he identifies of this is how 'letting the world know the story of your life' in the tag

line of one SNS over time has been changed to 'share your life'. Generally the object, that is shared, has become much more fuzzy and on SNS the word *share* is even often used without referring to any specific object at all.

In his account of sharing in consumer behavior Russell Belk examines how consumer sharing differs from commodity exchange and gift exchange [1,2]. In stead of offering a monothetic definition of sharing, he propose an alternative approach to a conceptualization of sharing, using Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblance as applied by Eleanor Rosch to describe a prototype of the concept, which any specific behavior can resemble more or less familiarity with [10,13]. The prototype of sharing he propose is "the pooling and allocation of resources within the family", which among other things is characterized by no expectations of reciprocity, a communal ownership over what is shared, and no need for an invitation or request to participate in the sharing. All these characteristics differ from the prototypes of gift giving and commodity exchange, which both involves (at least de facto) reciprocity, a transfer of ownership, and either a ceremonial or trade/barter context to make this transfer explicit.

Recyke y'Bike

Recyke y'Bike is a community social enterprise in Newcastle upon Tyne where volunteers fix used bikes, which is donated by the locals, and either sell them at affordable prices in their workshop or send them to charity purposes in Africa or locally. The study with Recyke y'Bike is still at a very early stage and so far it has only involved some exploratory, ethnographic fieldwork and interviews to clarify opportunities for a research collaboration. An interesting preliminary finding in the context of sharing, though, is that although a lot of their activities could easily be labeled

as sharing in both John and Belk's terms, they do not use this word themselves to describe their activities at all.

In John's terms, distributive sharing happens within Recyke y'Bike among the volunteers when they share the workshop, tools, and physical space of Recyke y'Bike as well as values of ecology and their interest in cycling. Communicative sharing also takes place when the volunteers share knowledge about bikes, but also when they share social experiences together, which is a very important part of the project for most of the participants.

The sharing of tools and space in the workshop of Recyke y'Bike also demonstrate several family resemblances with Belk's prototype of "the pooling and allocation of resources within the family". There is a communal ownership over these resources and all the volunteers can use these resources on equal terms. Belk also refers to this kind of sharing as *sharing in*, where one shares a common resource with one's extended self – in this case the "family" of volunteers [2]. But in addition to this, bikes and services are also shared between the broader local community and Recyke y'Bike. This kind of sharing, Belk refers to as *sharing out*, where there is a clearer distinction between giver and receiver and it is often close to gift giving. In the case of Recyke y'Bike, who sells the fixed bikes there is also some elements of commodity exchange in the sharing of bikes with the local community.

Citizenship norms among FOSS contributors

Free and open source software (FOSS) involves sharing on many levels. Distress with the requirement of software sellers on users to agree not to share software with others was initially one of the main motivations for

Richard Stallman to write the GNU Manifesto, which coined the term *free software* [12]. But also, FOSS contributors shares knowledge [11], time and resources, and in many cases values [5,8] as well as project infrastructure such as servers, code repositories and so on.

Unlike the case of Recyke y'Bikes, FOSS contribution is not an example of sharing within the local community. At least not local in a geographical sense. On the contrary, often FOSS projects has contributors from all over the world. Furthermore, FOSS development is not just developing digital tools, but also very much enabled by such tools, and thus this case might be a good place to look for advice on how to support sharing practices though our designs of digital tools.

Based on theories of citizenship norms and political participation, I have conducted a survey among 631 FOSS developers on their citizenship norms, involvement with FOSS and a range of other topics. The study shows that citizenship norms among FOSS developers tends to cluster in two categories based on duties and engagement respectively, which is consistent to what previous studies has shown is the case for other populations [6]. Analysis is still ongoing, but so far there does not seem to be any relation between the level of involvement with FOSS development and adherence to different kinds of citizenship norms.

The relevance of citizenship norms to FOSS contribution might suggest, more broadly, that sharing is not just another way of exchanging, distributing, and allocating resources, but also about building and sustaining community ties which fits well with Belk's distinction between sharing, gift giving, and commodity exchange.

The FOSS community, though, is also a good example of how these logics of sharing and commodity exchange does not always coexist easily. The very term *FOSS* reflects a basic divide between an ideological approach to *free software* represented by the Free Software Foundation [12] and a more pragmatic approach to *open source software* represented by The Open Source Initiative [9].

Conclusion

So far, this paper has illustrated that *sharing* is a concept with several meanings. Many things can be shared and sharing something can be done in several different ways. We can share physical things and places

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as well as abstract concepts like interests, but we can also share our thoughts, knowledge and feelings with each other. We can share things between us by dividing them in a zero-sum game or we can share communal ownership over resources, for which we don't expect anything in return for sharing.

Furthermore we have touched on the relationship between citizenship norms and sharing, which illustrates that sharing is about more than just exchange and distribution of resources – although it might also turn out to be an effective way to distribute resources under certain circumstances.

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