

Chapter 9

Varieties of Sharing: Action Frameworks, Structures, and Working Conditions in a New Field

Christian Papsdorf

Chemnitz University of Technology, Germany

Markus Hertwig

Chemnitz University of Technology, Germany

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on one element in the digitalisation of work: the forms and conditions of working in the so-called ‘sharing economy’ (SE). Based on an analysis of 67 SE platforms, it distinguishes three segments, each of which constitutes a distinctive institutional sphere within the sharing economy: these are an ‘exchange and gift economy’, a ‘niche and sideline economy’, and the ‘platform economy’. In a further step, the study then identified and compared five dimensions of work within these segments: the type of activity, the form of compensation or recompense involved (monetary or non-monetary), skills and competencies required, the role of technology, and control mechanisms. Each segment is associated with a particular pattern of these dimensions. The chapter then discusses the shift in the traditionally understood determinants of work now observable in the sharing economy. While some of these determinants are being added to by new factors, others are being displaced by internet communities and the socio-technical structures and strategies of the platform providers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The recent past has witnessed an accumulation of economic phenomena that, at first sight, seem to represent a movement beyond the logic and business models seen as defining late-capitalism: individuals now give away goods they no longer need, lend tools to strangers, rent out private rooms, or offer lifts to strangers. These, together with many other activities, have been collectively brought together under the concept of the ‘sharing economy’ (SE), a catch-all term covering internet-based platforms and market places that connect suppliers and customers offering and buying a dizzyingly wide range of products

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and services through processes that operate outside the conventions of traditional business models. For both the media and academic research, the SE is frequently associated with customer gains in terms of efficiency and quality, the emergence of innovative services and products, and economy in the use of scarce resources. There is also virtual unanimity that the SE marks a radical departure from the 'old economy' and is potentially superior to it in many respects.

At the same time, there is growing scepticism about whether the sharing economy is what it purports to be, given that many apparent web-based 'new' providers or apps often seem to be no more than a front for old-fashioned, and unapologetic, profit-driven businesses. An increasing number of studies (Hall and Krüger, 2015) have also highlighted the risks of precariousness to which those engaged in 'digital work' are exposed, including in what would appear to be the free and innovative, but also in some respects barely regulated, SE (see too Benner, 2015).

Some contributions to the debate on the SE (see Section 2) suggest that this represents an ambivalent and heterogeneous field in terms of the diversity of services on offer, the conditions under which the individuals involved work, and the institutional context and regulation of the social practice of sharing in this form. As yet, however, there have been few academic studies that have engaged with the evident diversity and heterogeneity of the platforms, actors and activities that make up the SE. This applies, in particular, to the content, conditions and consequences of SE work.

This shapes the context for the present study, which has two main aims; firstly, to investigate the different forms of the sharing economy, drawing on two dimensions to categorise sharing economy platforms and identify distinctive SE segments; and secondly, in an exploratory approach, to gather information on the conditions of work of providers in the sharing economy using five dimensions: the types of activity involved, skills and competencies, compensation (monetary and non-monetary), the role of technology, and control mechanisms. These two aims build on each other inasmuch as the study will compare and contrast work in each segment. The study argues that one of the key structuring factors for work in the SE is how it is institutionally embedded in each of the SE segments, including the strategies pursued by platform providers, the socio-technical structures that transport these platforms, and the cultural expectations of the internet communities involved.

The section that follows begins by reviewing the current state of research. Section 3 sets out the theoretical framework for the study. Section 4 outlines the methodology, with the two following Sections (5 and 6) presenting the findings in relation to the two research questions. Section 7 contains the discussion.

2. THE 'SHARING ECONOMY:' CONCEPT AND STATE OF RESEARCH

As Martin (2016: 151) has shown, the concept of the SE embraces and is used to cover a wide range of phenomena, making it difficult to arrive at a single and consistent definition. In practice, it continues to represent a somewhat ambiguous notion embracing a long list of synonyms, not all of which are equivalent in meaning (Martin 2016; Belk 2014; Dillahunt and Malone 2015).¹ Nonetheless, it is possible to discern some consensus between the various attempts at a definition. On this, the SE can be seen as a set of business models, platforms and exchange relationships (Alen and Berg 2014, following Daunoriene et al. 2015), in which resources, services or access to material goods (on a temporary basis) are gifted, exchanged, lent or purchased (Dillahunt und Malone 2015; Richardson 2015) between private individuals (peer-to-peer) in return for a fee or other forms of compensation (Belk 2014) via web-based social media platforms (Hamari et al. 2015).

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