The Politics of Mobilising a Sharing Economy

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This ethnographic study examines the inherent complexities involved in the mobilisation of a public sharing economy platform by a UK local government council. Our findings indicate structural socio-economic and socio-cultural/ideological constraints impacting upon the endeavour leading us, perhaps inevitably, to the conclusion that problems stem from the politics of sharing.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1700206/volumes/v11e/E-11

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examines the inherent complexities involved in the mobilisation of a public sharing economy platform by a UK local government council. Our findings indicate structural socio-economic and socio-cultural/ideological constraints impacting upon the endeavour leading us, perhaps inevitably, to the conclusion that problems stem from the politics of sharing.

The concept of ‘sharing’ has received considerable attention and critique (Belk 2010, 2013, 2014, 2016; Arnould and Rose 2016). The nature of exchange among participants of sharing economy platforms has galvanised marketing attention in particular (Corciolini and Dalli 2014; Harvey, Smith and Golightly 2017; Scarabotto 2015). Although some authors claim that the sharing economy isn’t about sharing at all (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Eckhardt and Bardhi 2015), others suggest that it facilitates ‘new hybridised forms of pro-social exchange [that] are complex and challenging to theorise’ (Harvey, Smith and Golightly 2017: 369). Schor (2014) adds a moral dimension to the debate when she raises concerns that certain ‘for-profit’ platforms have co-opted what began as a progressive, socially transformative idea. She suggests ‘the key to making sharing economies socially just...[lies in]...nurturing collective, public forms of sharing’ (2014: 11). Hall and Ince remind us however that ‘real-life manifestations of sharing, whether they be skills, stuff or stories, are far more complex and contested than we might think’ (2018: 1).

This paper shines a light on the complexities of mobilising a public sharing platform. It does so by adopting an ethnographic methodology to analyse the initiation of a sharing platform by a local government council in the UK. Prior to launching the platform online, the council commissioned us to provide independent evaluation of a series of sharing pilots it had set up with various community groups for the specific purpose of identifying barriers and problems that inhibit sharing in this context. For the purpose of brevity, we focus here on a pilot for sharing stuff, which involved the council sharing gardening equipment with a residents’ association in order to facilitate the tending of open green spaces. Interviews were conducted with key members of the residents’ association and a member of the council and focused on the participants’ experiences of the sharing pilot. Influenced by Hall and Ince who advise that we ‘must think of sharing as a pervasive and contested practice which can bring to light multiple, contradictory dimensions of contemporary economic life’ (2018: 5), our research provides a preliminary understanding of political tensions which inhibit collective, public forms of sharing.

In order to advance our understanding of the political facets of sharing it is instructive to begin thinking about the sharing economy from the vantage point of the macro-level of the economy rather than the meso-level of a particular sharing platform and in so doing we take inspiration from the work of White and Williams (2018). Seeking an alternative to the capitalist economy, these authors look to the conceptual domain of anarchist thought and practice; promptly inviting us not to ‘reduce anarchism to its linguistic instantiation’ (Shukaitis 2009: 150 cited in White and Williams 2018: 177) since this brings to mind a very limited understanding. Instead they relay that the broad ambition of anarchist thought lies in changing unequal power relations within society. The authors juxtapose theoretical exposition of anarchism with empirical analysis of household work practice surveys to evidence concrete instances of ‘mutual aid’ (i.e. unpaid work for people in other households), which they argue is ‘consistent with an anarchist reading of organisation: i.e. not coerced, undertaken for non-economic rationales, altruism, reciprocity, and ethics of care’ (2018: 179).

Their research illuminates the ‘complexity and richness of economic life’ (2018:179), often masked by the rhetoric of the capitalist economy. Our empirical analysis demonstrates how macro-level phenomena – capitalism and anarchism - are played out at the micro-level of individual engagement in sharing. It does so by reporting on three tensions, which run through participants’ engagement in the sharing pilot under study. These tensions (on the left-hand side capitalism and the right-hand side anarchism) are namely; (1) Formal versus local/informal modes of organising; (2) Hierarchy of power relations versus changing unequal power relations, and (3) Monetary exchange versus mutual aid/altruism.

The tension between formal versus local/informal modes of organising is apparent in terms of health and safety. For example, it was clear that for the council, one of the key issues would be in working through formal rules and regulations with regard to the health and safety of volunteers. For the volunteers however, the formal training was simple common sense. Tensions arose in that the time and resources involved only five volunteers had been trained and could therefore use the equipment. The hierarchy of power relations versus changing unequal power relations was palpable in terms of labour and the scheduling of work. For the council it was absolutely vital to delineate their role in the maintenance of open green spaces from the contribution that volunteers could make. However, administering this was problematic in that volunteers were expected only to do “an interim cut when we weren’t cutting [but]...It very quickly didn’t work like that because our teams were turning up and the grass was cut.” The volunteers clearly understood the predicament of the public sector spending cuts, but in viewing themselves as “working with the council” to achieve joint goals, were seemingly oblivious that they could be perceived as taking over council jobs. The tension between monetary exchange and mutual aid/altruism is particularly interesting since this is ambiguous for both parties. Despite admiring the work, time and commitment of the volunteers the council was dubious of being able to support the sharing initiative because of the financial costs. For the volunteers the priority was building a sense of community; however vestiges of individualistic financial motives were apparent in that many felt proper tending of shared green spaces would have a positive impact on house prices.

Adopting an ethnographic approach, this research heeds the call to refocus social analysis on ‘the problems of co-operation, co-existence, togetherness and being-in-common...precisely because it foregrounds the importance of thinking of sharing as a difficult practice’ (Barnett 2018: xiv). Similar to Corciolini and Dalli (2014) we shine a light on the desire to ‘liberate’ certain activities from the logic of the marketplace, but add to this observation a preliminary understanding of the political tensions in trying to achieve this.

REFERENCES


Belk, Russell (2014), “You are what you can access: Sharing and collaborative consumption online,” Journal of Business Research, 67 (8), 1595-1600.


