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Sharing Economy, Sharing Responsibility?

Corporate Social Responsibility in the Digital Age

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Abstract:

The sharing economy has transformed economic transactions, created new organizational forms, and contributed to changes in consumer culture. Started as a movement with promises of a more sustainable, democratic, and inclusive economy, the sharing economy, and its impact on such issues as privacy, discrimination, worker rights, and regulation, is now the subject of heated debate. Many of these issues root in the changes that digital technologies have brought and the unresolved moral and ethical questions emerging therefrom. This special issue contributes to this ongoing debate with five articles that develop theoretical frameworks and conduct empirical investigations, providing fine-grained analyses of urgent issues in the sharing economy. In this introduction we highlight these and other issues that we believe deserve future attention from business ethics scholarship.

Keywords: *Sharing Economy, Platform Governance, Collaborative Consumption, Digital Transformation*

Introduction

The entrepreneurial drive to technological and organizational innovation is a major source of change in social norms and practice. While this understanding is generally well established, the business ethics literature has largely refrained from specifically and explicitly focusing on the role commerce plays in such technological developments. With the digital transformation that has affected nearly all forms of business over the last decade, however, and given parallel developments calling for better, more inclusive and humanistic technologies and business ecosystems, there is a need for business ethicists to increasingly engage with the manifold ways in which digital technologies are informed by, and sometimes transformative of, normative considerations of fundamental concern (e.g., Martin, 2018; Martin & Freeman, 2004; Flyverbom, Deibert, & Matten, 2019; Stohl et al., 2016; Whelan, Moon & Grant, 2013).

In this special issue we are concerned with ethical matters that relate to one recent socio-economic development enabled through digital technology, and that we here term, "the sharing economy" (Belk, 2014; Lamberton & Rose, 2012; Sundararajan, 2016). The sharing economy's emergence has been built on rapid advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) – e.g., mobile Internet, geolocation, matching algorithms, big data – that have enabled new 'sharing' practices, or new forms of distributing goods and services, to occur at a previously unimaginable speed and scale (Beverungen, Bohm, & Land, 2015; Mair & Reischauer, 2017; Sundararajan, 2016). By enabling participants to borrow *and* lend underutilized assets, the sharing economy has also contributed to a blurring of traditional boundaries that have differentiated producers from consumers, or providers from takers (Böcker & Meelen, 2016; Schor & Fitzmaurice, 2015; Stephany, 2015).

Nevertheless, a number of powerful digital platform organizations have also emerged as key players in this relatively new domain. Indeed, such platforms are increasingly

acknowledged as an existential threat to various industries: e.g., the taxi industry. By and large, this is because digital platform organizations already have created, or are in the process of creating, what amounts to entire new markets that appeal to long-standing demands for convenience and communal living, amongst other things. Examples of such organizational forms include not-for-profit actors involved in food swaps and open source developments; and profit-oriented ventures that focus on organizing room rentals (Guttentag, 2015), driving services (Cramer & Krueger, 2016), crowd logistics (Carbone, Rouquet, & Roussat, 2017), collaborative financing (Belleflamme, Lambert, & Schwienbacher,2014), and so on.

The growing prominence of these new organizational and market forms have led to heated and unresolved debates surrounding the societal impacts and responsibilities of such sharing economy organizations. To some considerable extent, the difficulty that interested parties are confronted with in resolving these debates is due to the core concept of 'sharing' being defined in different ways, and to its often being associated with different objectives.

As the sharing economy traces its origins back to older, not-for-profit initiatives and lifestyles, it was originally portrayed as a movement offering a more ethical and sustainable alternative to capitalist markets by facilitating new forms of (non-) market exchange (Botsman & Rogers, 2011; Schor & Thompson, 2014). This original, community-centric, out-look, is informed by an understanding that conceives of sharing as inherently altruistic; as strongly enabling of social collaboration, equity, and democratization; and as capable of re-dressing a variety of societal and environmental concerns in general (Belk, 2010; Belk, 2007; Botsman & Roger, 2010; McLaren & Agyman, 2015; Frenken & Shor, 2017). Moreover, this perspective has tended to suggest that, by limiting the centrality of profit-oriented corpora-tions (Davis, 2016), the sharing economy can help give rise to a society in which the interests of the population at large trump those of specific corporations (Schor & Thompson, 2014),

By way of contrast, more critical voices suggest that key participants in the sharing economy are much more driven by narrow economic interests than they are by ideals of reciprocity, or some concern to promote the social or communal good (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Belk, 2014; Lamberton & Rose, 2012). Furthermore, it has been noted that, given the emergence of profit-driven and monopolistic platform organizations (Baron, 2018), the sharing economy should be perceived as an intensification of capitalism rather than some sort of pro-social alternative to it (Malhotra & Van Alstyne, 2014; Morozov, 2013; Murillo, Buckland, & Val, 2017). In this fashion, the sharing economy has come to be increasingly portrayed as a neo-liberal nightmare: a new sort of corporate-digital feudalism (Rosenblat & Stark, 2015; Moore & Robinson, 2015; Slee, 2016; Murillo et al., 2017) that profits from the (significant) exacerbation of such moral concerns as privacy invasion, monopoly, and worker exploitation (Irani, 2015; Scholz, 2013; Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2014; Slee, 2016).

With the publication of this special issue, we explore how what was once hailed as a sustainable and communal lifestyle movement rooted in counterculture, has increasingly come to be seen as the posterchild for all that is wrong with contemporary capitalism. We thus begin to unpack, over the course of this special issue, some of the most important ethical issues that ongoing sharing economy transformations are giving rise to. In a deliberate attempt to avoid assuming that the sharing economy is (all) good or (all) bad, we have sought to publish articles that critically reflect upon, and that open, rather than close, a forum to sharing economy ethics and morality. Further to its being comprised of articles that contribute to a variety of long-standing concerns in the business ethics literature (e.g., the development and transformation of moral norms, corporate social responsibility, business regulation, labour rights, sustainable development), we believe that the articles contained in this special issue combine to clearly demonstrate that the sharing economy itself is deserving of more attention within the field of business ethics.

Through their sensitive and pointed analysis of such matters as Uber's destabilization of the Montréal taxi market (Mercier-Roy & Mailhot, 2019), how cities struggle with regulating the sharing economy towards the public good (Vith, Oberg, Höllerer and Meyer, 2019), how sharing platforms try to position themselves towards growing public and regulatory accountability (Berkowitz and Souchaud, 2019; Wruk, Oberg, Klutt and Maurer, 2019), and how value is created and distributed between platforms and providers (Chai & Scully, 2019), the articles here collected help to get us beyond the tendency to oversimplify sharing economy moral matters. They demonstrate that, even when the motivations of actors may be more or less fixed and readily identifiable (e.g., profitability, the social good, stable employment, convenience), nuances always emerge that make it naïve to suggest that the sharing economy, the platforms involved therein, and the consequences that emerge therefrom, could be entirely positive or negative.

In light of such considerations, we use the remainder of the special issue's introduction to first delve a little more fully into what it means to write of the 'sharing economy'. Following this, we identify three core sets of moral or ethical issues that the sharing economy is related to, and that we believe can help frame future work in business ethics. Finally, we provide a brief overview of the five articles that follow, and briefly situate the special issue's publication with reference to broader scholarly developments.

The Sharing Economy

While the phenomenon of the sharing economy has attracted substantial attention from such disciplines as law (Rogers, 2015), sociology (Arvidsson, 2008), marketing (Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015) and management and organization studies (Laamanen et al., 2016), its profound societal impact has only recently started to attract the

interest of business ethics scholars. When our call for this special issue was published in December 2016, for example, the *Journal of Business Ethics* had not yet published a single article on the topic of the "Sharing Economy" (or "Gig Economy"). Nevertheless, over the last three years, the topic has started to attract more attention, with various works that relate to, if not solely focus on, the sharing economy and business ethics beginning to appear (e.g., Ahsan, 2018; Etzioni, 2017; Fieseler, Bucher, & Hoffmann, 2017; Martin, 2018; Whelan, 2019a; Yin, Quian, & Singhapakdi, 2018),

Any discussion of the sharing economy has to start with a definition of the overall object of interest. However, the debate over how to define the sharing economy is as contested as the debate over what constitutes "real" sharing (Belk, 2014). Indeed, given the prevalence of monetized sharing-services, critical observers have highlighted that the 'sharing economy' label may be little more than a misappropriation (Acquier, Daudigeos & Pinske, 2017; Martin, 2016; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015). Consequently, terms like the "pseudo-sharing" or "anti-sharing" economy have been proposed as alternatives (Belk, 2014). Suffice it to note that numerous definitions of the sharing economy have emerged in recent years, with different degrees of scope and a variety of normative underpinnings. In seeking to avoid this definitional mess (and the various essentialist positions associated therewith), we here follow Acquier and colleagues (2017) in pragmatically noting that the sharing economy, and the organizations operating therein, are often associated with one or more of the following considerations.

First, they are often associated with the sharing or exchange of underused assets, such as properties, tools, or financial assets (e.g., Schor & Fitzmaurice, 2015). Whilst not necessarily a common feature of all sharing services, this enabling of slack resource usage has often been taken as evidence of the sharing economy's potential to ameliorate concerns relating to sustainability (e.g., Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Frenken & Schor, 2017). Second, there can

be a clear community-element to the sharing economy, one which draws attention to sharing amongst a crowd, and to the prospect of ever more inclusive and empowering organizational forms (Frenken & Shor, 2017). This communal sensibility has been highlighted by those emphasising the pro-social orientation of sharing arrangements, whereby participants enter into some sort of equal and reciprocal exchange relationship (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Bradley & Paragman, 2017). Third, the sharing economy can be associated with co-ordinated, platform-centric, phenomena (Malhotra & Van Alstyne, 2014; Reischauer & Mair, 2018). This aspect focuses on the ways in which a central platform organization or corporation intermediates transactions between decentralized peers. Through creating and controlling developments in ICTs – e.g., mobile apps that enable quick and automated identification and matching of these exchange partners (Gawer, 2014) – platform managers and owners become hierarchically central to sharing activities and can potentially generate significant levels of (personal and corporate) wealth by diminishing transaction costs between producers and consumers (Gawer, 2011).

At the time of writing, it is this platform aspect of the sharing economy that is arguably most prominent. Given that many platforms are strongly, if not solely, motivated by profit in their efforts to connect a decentralized network or producers with consumers (e.g., Srnicek, 2016), it is also that aspect of the sharing economy that most clearly resonates with well-established business ethics concerns: e.g., the governance and regulation of the sharing economy; working conditions of the sharing economy; and issues around digital technologies and data. As we believe that each of these sets of issues are deserving of much more attention from business ethics scholars, we quickly summarize them below.

Governance and regulation of the sharing economy: By creating new forms of organizations and new market structures, the sharing economy raises various questions as to the

governance and regulation of its central players, the platforms. These firms often operate in regulatory grey areas exploiting ambiguous laws and legal loopholes (Biber et al., 2017). Indeed, such governance gaps are often seen as a competitive advantage over established players in the fields they disrupt: who generally have to comply with relatively well established and enforced laws and regulations (Sundararajan, 2016). As a result, some observers call for stronger regulation of platform organizations (Calo & Rosenblatt, 2017; Edelman & Geradin, 2016) so as to redress concerns relating to such matters as competition, taxes, labour standards, property rights, consumer protection, privacy, housing affordability, and gentrification (e.g., Lee, 2016).

The novel form of platform organizations, however, creates significant challenges for regulation (Rauch & Schleicher, 2015; Baron, 2018; Calo & Rosenblat, 2017) in that centralized frameworks are often considered ill-suited to the regulation of platforms and networks (Biber et al., 2017; Cortez, 2014; Hong & Lee, 2017). Furthermore, there is the concern that centralized regulation and governance could hinder positive developments (Brescia, 2016). Overall, then, the need for regulation, and the form and degree it might take, remains highly contested (Schor, 2014, Morozov, 2013, McLaren & Agyeman, Sundarajan, 2016).

Unsurprisingly – and as various examples relating to Uber, AirBnB, and other platform organizations illustrate – governments are using different forms and combinations of hard and soft law to address these concerns. Likewise, some within the scholarly community argue for public or state-based regulation (Chaffe & Rapp, 2012; Hong & Lee, 2017, p. 2018); whilst others argue for the merits of partnership governance models (Sundararajan, 2015) or models of self-regulation (Cohen & Sundararajan, 2016) on the grounds that they decentralize the responsibility to regulate, and promise new and innovative forms of addressing social and moral concerns. In sum, the question of sharing economy governance, which is addressed

throughout this special issue (e.g., Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019; Vith et al., 2019), clearly needs further attention from business ethics scholarship.

Working conditions of the sharing economy: Recent years have seen increasing criticism of working arrangements in the sharing economy. Providers who deliver goods, and particularly services, are often working in flexible arrangements for platform firms with little pay and little representation in decision-making (Katz & Krueger, 2016). Furthermore, the new working arrangements often mean a shift, or outsourcing, of responsibilities from the corporate to the individual actor (Healy, Nicholson, & Pekarek, 2017). These developments raise important questions regarding ethics and employment (Greenwood, 2002) for new employment settings and related experiences (Bucher, Fieseler, & Lutz, 2016; Bucher & Fieseler, 2016). While digital technologies arguably provide a certain degree of freedom to providers in the sharing economy, it also intensifies precarious working conditions through quantification of work and increased competition (e.g., Moore & Robinson, 2016; Belk, 2014; Calo & Rosenblat, 2017; Martin, 2016; Pettica-Harris et al., 2018; Ravenelle, 2017; Schor, 2016).

Nevertheless, more optimistic observers identify "solidarity" in the sharing economy (Acquier et al., 2017; Newlands, Lutz, & Fieseler, 2018) when they refer to the collaborative nature of the exchange between parties or peers. While solidarity may span between providers to a certain degree, the power of platforms can enable them to siphon "off too much value", thus leaving the workers that provide the actual products and services underpaid (Schor, 2016, p. 2). Overall, the nature of work in the sharing economy oscillates between understandings of providers as empowered entrepreneurs who enjoy independent flexibility and exploited digital workers oscillating between platforms in search of the next gig. Like Chai &

Sully (2019) in this special issue, then, future work in business ethics scholarship will inevitably need to focus further on the changing working conditions of the sharing economy.

Digital technology and data: Digital technology and data are central to the sharing economy's existence. Amongst other things, ICTs can both exacerbate and alleviate concerns relating to such moral matters as accountability, discrimination, manipulation, monopoly, privacy, ownership, surveillance, and transparency (e.g., Baron, 2018; Calo & Rosenblat, 2017; Etzioni, 2017; Flyverbom, 2015; Martin, 2018; Lutz, Hoffmann, Bucher, & Fieseler, 2017; Whelan, 2019a; Whelan, 2019b;). To some considerable extent, these concerns arise because platform software, data analytics, and data itself, comprise some of the most valuable assets that platform companies can own and control (Srnicek, 2016). Furthermore, they arise because rating systems are more or less ubiquitous to the functioning of the sharing economy: with platform companies using them to enforce, or raise, the (perceived) quality of the products or services that their networks facilitate access to (Whelan, 2019a).

Whether or not they are explicitly or deliberately inscribed with ethical or moral ideals and values (Martin, 2018), technologies are always inseparable from them (Martin & Freeman, 2014). Indeed, the spread or diffusion of technologies, and the use to which they are put by individual and organizational actors, can prove morally and ethically transformative (Whelan, 2019a; 2019b). Consequently, and as Mercier-Roy & Mailhot (2019) show in this special issue, what often proves most controversial about sharing economy platforms is that they destabilize previously well established, and institutionally well protected, moral norms and preferences. The various ways in which sharing economy digital technologies and data (collection and analysis techniques) are ethically inscribed and ethically transformative, then, is, once again, likely to prove a fecund field for future business ethics research.

The Articles in this Special Issue

Theoretically, and in line with the aims of this journal, the articles in this special issue draw from a variety of theories and concepts. What the articles share, however, is that they employ theories rooted in business ethics to investigate the sharing economy and use their investigations of the sharing economy to further develop business ethics theories.

In their article, "It's about Distributing Rather than Sharing: Using Labour Process Theory to Probe the Sharing Economy", Chai and Scully (2019) develop a theoretical framework to analyse the sharing economy with a focus on labour, as one of the emerging key issues of the phenomenon. While the aspect of labour in the sharing economy has been highlighted as a key asset or as part of the customer interface for sharing services, the authors take a different approach that lends itself towards an investigation from a business perspective. The suggested approach allows us to explore emerging labour issues in the sharing economy with a view on unequal exchange rooted in the power dynamic between labour and capital. After giving a historic overview of the labour process theory (LPT), the authors expand the framework and apply it to Uber as an illustrative case. The authors conduct an insightful analysis showing how Uber engages in activities of "obscuring and securing", whereby technology functions as a control device to direct, evaluate, and discipline work. They also show how the invisibility of owners and managers mystifies the exertion of control and how possessive individualism works as a skewed sense of entrepreneurship against workers. Overall the authors provide a fresh take on labour process theory that explains how value is created and distributed, whereby the example of Uber reveals how the platforms tend to favour capital over labour. As Uber is an extreme case for unequitable distribution of value, future research might reveal diverging results.

In their article "(Self-) Regulation of Sharing Economy Platforms through Partial Meta Organization" Berkowitz and Souchaud (2019) explore the question of how governance gaps

in the sharing economy can be filled. The authors study the emergence of a form self-regulation through a partial "meta-organization", i.e. organizations of organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008), which is typical for industry self-regulation (King & Lenox, 2000; Palazzo & Richter, 2005). With an in-depth case study in the crowd-funding sector, the authors argue that this hybrid governance approach offers a solution for how to regulate platform organizations of the sharing economy and discuss sector-level conditions for successful self-regulation. The explorative article contributes to the relevant debate on governance, which is highly contested and has so far produced divergent outcomes. While many scholars and regulators call for tighter public regulation the article offers a fresh view, by suggesting an approach that combines government regulation, self-regulation, and civil-society participation.

Mercier-Roy and Mailhot (2019) study the ongoing controversy relating to Uber's entry into the Montréal market, and dynamic impacts this controversy is having on moral values and understandings. In their study, the authors build upon the orders of worth framework of Boltanski & Thévenot (2006) to investigate moral dimensions mobilized by various actors in order to negotiate the collective understanding of value regarding the material features of an object. The article develops the notion of 'agencement', and builds on related notion of assemblage, alignment, and compromise in doing so. Empirically, the authors conduct an analysis of Montreal's taxi market based on news media data. The results of the study not only highlight the plurality of norms and moral concerns that saturate sharing economy deliberations, but also show how the entanglement of ethics, technology, and social change can be studied by investigating the concrete work of re-organizing socio-material elements during controversies.

Wruk, Oberg, Klutt and Maurer's (2019) article "The presentation of self as good and right: How value propositions and business model features are linked in the sharing economy" is an exploration of platforms' self-presentation strategies vis-à-vis social expectations. In their article, the authors portray platforms' efforts to legitimatize themselves as belonging to "the right set of sharing organizations" promoting a more sustainable economic model, as opposed to the ever more often summoned spectre of platforms fostering commodification, erosion of labour rights, and overconsumption. Employing semantic network analysis on the national debate surrounding the sharing economy, and platforms own narratives, in Germany, they empirically show the dichotomy between sharing initiatives characterized by nonmonetary and local approaches and sharing platforms of monetary and global orientation. What sets this article apart from previous depictions of this split economy is that the article goes beyond the narrative of the sharing model's cooptation through arguably commercial entities and raises the question whether we should not also examine sharing organizations on a feature level.

Finally, in their article "Envisioning the 'sharing city': Governance strategies for the sharing economy", Vith, Oberg, Höllerer, and Meyer (2019) investigate how city councils interpret, engage with, and govern the sharing economy in their respective jurisdictions. Empirically, they employ a qualitative comparative analysis of 16 cities to uncover the spectrum of interpretations that urban policy- and strategy-makers harbour with regard to the sharing economy and what kind of governance responses they consider appropriate. In doing so they show a number of distinct interpretations ranging from risk to opportunity frames that are associations with public governance strategies. As the authors lay out in their article, their work is among the first to systematize the political and ethical debates around the sharing economy

on a local policy level and helps us better understand the business repercussions sharing organizations may encounter depending on (here local) interpretations of their (good) citizenship.

Conclusions

Simultaneous to our special issue call, other journals, such as the Journal of Management Studies (Wang et al., 2016) and the Academy of Management Discoveries (Laamanen et al., 2016), launched special issue calls and published articles on the sharing economy. Moreover, there has recently been a number of edited books published on the sharing economy in the fields of critical marketing (Bhardi, Eckehardt, & Belk, 2019) and the law (Davidson, Finck, & Infranca, 2018).

As these parallel developments indicate, there is growing interest in the sharing economy. Given that the sharing economy continues to be characterized by divergent narratives and discourses (Acquier et al., 2017; Cadagnone et al., 2016; Gruszka, 2017; Laurell & Sandström, 2017) – many of which are shaped, or strategically adopted, by companies and other actors with an interest in (de-)legitimating (Castello et al., 2016; Etter et al., 2018) sharing economy practices – this interest seems likely to grow even further. We believe that the field of business ethics should be an increasingly prominent voice in such debates and developments. We thus hope that others will build on the insights found in the special issue's articles to further advance our understanding of the complex, descriptive and normative ethical issues that the sharing economy is likely to be associated with for years to come.

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