Blurring the boundaries: prosumption, circularity and online sustainable consumption through Freecycle.

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Abstract

This paper explores the digital exchange and moral ordering of sustainable and ethical consumption in online Freecycle groups. Through interactive exchanges in digital (online posts) and material (consumer items) modes, Freecycling blurs three common binaries in analyses of consumption: 1) consumption/production; 2) digital/material; 3) mainstream/alternative. Drawing on Ritzer's notion of 'implosions' as well as practice theory, I show that Freecycling practices reimagine and reproduce both products and consumers, practising prosumption through mixed digital and material practices, and how mainstream and alternative ways of consuming are entangled in pursuit of more sustainable, ethical consumption. This challenges us to think beyond these traditional binaries and to conceptualise a more blurred, less analytically clean and more circular approach to studying consumption.

Introduction

When we upgraded our 12-year old analogue television to a digital one a few years ago, the retailer refused to recycle it; rather than send the old set to the local authority dump, I joined two local 'Freecycle' groups to offer it to members for free. Within two days, someone drove to my house in northern England to collect it and told me that she intended to ship it to her mother in the Gambia. I also began to receive literally thousands of online posts, opening my eyes to a whole world of recycling via the internet, with thousands of people signing up to 'keep stuff out of landfill'.[i]

At first, I thought Freecycling was all about recycling and diverting the normal linear trajectory of disposal from the rubbish bin to someone else's house, however temporarily. But later I realised that this was about more than recycling: the exchanges – both digitally through online chat and materially through swapping objects – change how consumption is practised, how products are used (some are even dismantled or reconstructed) and how consumers understand themselves and others. Products are plastic and the moral ordering of consumption is continually restructured through circular movements of meanings and materials. By 'moral ordering', I mean the categorisation and valuation (in monetary and non-monetary terms) of goods and people, including applying hierarchies of worth and ethical weightings. These include being ethical or sustainable but also being thrifty, useful or demonstrating the user's competence to repair or reinvent items. Practices that seemingly get rid of 'stuff' (Miller, 2009) are also practices that create 'stuff' and shape other consumption practices such as purchasing, cooking, browsing and eating. Analysing Freecycling thus exposes this circularity in 'prosumption', a term used to emphasise the blurring of consumption and production in modern practices, as I show below, and also challenges the ingrained binaries that tend to underlie analyses of consumption, especially the three binaries of production/consumption, virtual/material and mainstream/alternative.

Let me begin by outlining how Freecycle works. Beginning in the USA in 2003, Freecycling has now spread to many other countries. An online Freecycle group is usually centred on (and named after) a

local area, town or county and has volunteer moderators who try to police members' online behaviour. Members apply to join a group and if they are accepted by the moderators, they can logon to the website and both read and write online posts. There are four basic types of Freecycle post:

1. 'Offer' posts offer items (for free) to members, who then arrange to collect from the offerer's home;
2. 'Taken' posts from the original offerer announce that 'Offered' items have been (or are expected to be) collected and are thus no longer available;
3. 'Wanted' posts announce items that members would like to receive from other members (for free);
4. 'Received' posts announce that items posted as 'Wanted' have indeed been received by a member, and usually thank the offerer.

For this paper, I gathered data about Freecycling from participant observation online within two Freecycle groups in 2011-2013[ii]. I collated all 1,355 posts (representing many more individual items on 'offer') made in the month of May 2013 in one Freecycle group based in northern England, to examine the types of goods offered and wanted. In this Freecycle group, 'Offered' posts were the most frequent at over half (56%) of posts in May 2013, with 'Taken' and 'Wanted' being 18% and 16% respectively (Table 1). Members also posted pictures of their 'Offered' items and a discussion 'café' hosted more general chat about Freecycling and other local services. In this paper, I also refer to other posts (e.g. by group moderators) that explained or commented on online activity and group management.

Table 1. Profile of a Freecycle/Freegle group in the UK.

2005	Founded; moved to Freegle in late 2013.
7,600+	Number of members as of October 2013 (likely to include many inactive members: indeed, this number reduced to 952 in February 2014, shortly after the group had moved to Freegle)
1,355	Total posts online in May 2013, comprised of:
765	'Offered' posts (c.56%)
239	'Taken' posts (c.18%, including items described as 'Taken subject to collection' or 'STC', which sometimes were not collected, resulting in them being re-offered later)
218	'Wanted' posts (c.16%)
29	'Received' posts (c.2%)
16	Other posts (c.1%, include clarifications, corrections and moderators' messages)

Notes: Calculations by author and include a little double-counting, when some items in a post are said to be 'Taken' but others in the same post are still on 'Offer'.

What makes Freecycling particularly intriguing compared to other recycling practices like jumble sales, car boot sales or yard sales, is that members also request items as 'Wanted' and often also thank the donors when the items have been 'Received'. Unlike other forms of disposal to family and friends or, more anonymously, to charity shops (e.g. Gregson and Crewe, 2003), Freecycle members see their generosity legitimated through other members' expressions of desire, demonstrating the circularity of consumption (also Lepawsky and Mather, 2011) and how consumption grades gradually into production, rather than being sharply separated from it or neatly subsequent to it. And some groups also follow up all 'Offerers' automatically to ask if items have been collected and, by extrapolating, estimate how much has been 'kept out of landfill', e.g. "9433kg reused in last month"(10th February 2014).

In this paper, I use these Freecycle practices to show how the circularity of re-using products disrupts three binaries: 1) consumption/production, where products are re-imagined, repaired and re-offered by Freecycling prosumers; 2) digital/material, where online Freecycling posts create exchanges of physical objects, shifting them from place to place and also reimagine the physical way in which they are used and by whom; and 3) mainstream/alternative, where Freecycling practices seek to make sustainable consumption not only pleasurable, but also draw on mainstream consumption repertoires to promote it, rather than maintaining a clearly separate 'alternative' set of practices.

Another binary that I could have analysed is that of agency/structure, where the power to make decisions and have influence is located either in individual agents or in broader arrangements (e.g. economic patterns, cultural norms) that control or limit the behaviour of individuals. However, this huge debate is both beyond the remit of this paper, involving as it does the vast literature on structuration theory and post-structuralist thought, and not specific to consumption. I have therefore concentrated on the binaries that are currently used (wrongly, in my view) more specifically to compartmentalise consumption practices. In particular, instead of idealising 'alternative' practices of 'sustainable' consumption, as is common in the literature, I follow the social and digital practices of consumption themselves to expose the limitations of such binaries, drawing particularly on approaches using social practice theory, to argue that such divisions are both inaccurate and unhelpful.

It is through such blurrings and circularities of value (both instrumental and ethical) that Freecycling practices render prosumption more explicit in the performance of sustainable consumption, tying together the material practices of consuming and disposing of goods (what Gregson et al., 2007 term 'divesting') and the virtual practices of moral re-ordering of goods. As we shall see, although Freecycling is not an arena where prices normally attach to things, it is a one where worth can be created in other ways, especially through moral virtue and ethics. It therefore challenges us to rethink three binaries by causing what Ritzer (1999) referred to as 'implosions', blurring or collapsing dichotomies or boundaries between supposedly separate realms of social meaning and practice, such as shopping and leisure settings, e.g. cruise ships, museums, cybermalls, virtual reality gaming (and see Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007). In what follows, I outline the three binaries that I have chosen, and demonstrate how each is blurred by the 'implosions' of Freecycling practices.

Implosion 1: Consumption/production and the rise of prosumption

First there is the blurring or implosion of consumption and production, what has been termed 'prosumption' (e.g. Currah, 2003; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Ritzer, 2014; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Zwick et al., 2008). Examples include consumers doing work previously done by paid employees in self-service restaurants and supermarkets, such as clearing tables and selecting food. In digital worlds, prosumption includes consumers and producers co-creating value for products through self-generated content (what Castells (2010) calls 'mass self-communication'), such as videos posted for free consumption or paid for by adverts and consumer reviews of music, film and books written on retailer sites for free. Because of these multiple examples, Ritzer (2014, page 11) refers to the internet as the natural 'home' of prosumption today. He also (ibid., pages 18-19) weighs up whether we can interpret prosumption theoretically as "the eternal return of the same, a revolutionary new development, or... continuous with earlier developments" before concluding that it is all three, being "simultaneously, something that is primal, ancient, recent, new, and even revolutionary." As I shall show, Freecycling is both trying to do something new to challenge existing cultures of consumption, but also often falls back into traditional repertoires of meaning and valuing.

Analyses of digital prosumption have also shown how people buy and sell things in cybermalls like eBay or virtual worlds like Second Life (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010a, b; Reisch, 2001; Ritzer, 1999). But there has been little attention paid to how things are exchanged and transformed, such as the use of eBay for divestment instead of purchase. In Freecycling, items are exchanged and transformed as users

interactively and collectively shift items across moral registers, from 'unwanted' to 'Wanted', from 'bads' to 'goods'. Hence, rather than consumers merely responding to a commercial retailer's 'offer' (which is now a common phrase for products and services more generally), Freecycle encourages consumers to design and post their own desires, even if these often seem unrealistic, and also for items to be repaired and their use reimagined, turning the consumer of the original item into a prosumer of a reused, recirculated item.

As well as re-imagining items, digital communication enables users to re-imagine themselves too, to present their personalities and desires in diverse ways and to perform multiple subjectivities. Facebook offers 'public witnessing' (Miller, 2011: 180) of how the self is presented through the pictures posted or the jokes or groups that the user chooses to 'Like'. Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2010a) note that digital virtual consumption offers possibilities for experimentating with oneself and with commodities, such as re-imagining subjectivities through creating a new online self of a different gender or imaginary persona (e.g. a wizard).

Hence, digitial prosumption offers ways to collectively produce, change and re-produce moral ordering through (culturally mediated) interaction. Commodities are commodified (for purchase), then "decommodified" (through use and personalisation) and sometimes may be "recommodified" or "recontextualised" (for resale) "through a series of moments, of which exchange for money is just one" (Sayer, 2003). In the case of divestment in particular, the implicit linearity and one-way directionality in typical analyses of commodity chains that end with disposal can be re-imagined through circularity, with waste being reused, recycled and reinvented as other products, comparable to ideas of 'industrial symbiosis', 'industrial ecology' and 'closing the loop' of manufacturing/disposal (e.g. Jackson, 1996). Thus, in a study of e-waste, Lepawsky and Mather (2011: 247) "kept finding 'value', not 'waste'" as things/materialities moved into *and out of* the category of 'valueless'.

In Freecycling, this idea of (re-)imagining goods and morally re-ordering their values takes place through diverse practices, practices that are shared and circular, and therefore best analysed as 'prosumptive', rather than merely productive or consumptive, because "production and consumption are sub-types of prosumption; it is prosumption that is the more general process that subsumes the other two" (Ritzer 2014, page 11). Items are repackaged, redesigned and handed over to new users. For example, items on 'Offer' may be broken or at least without value to the current owner, perhaps because of insufficient repair skills or storage space, but presented as potentially working and of value for a future owner:

> "**OFFERED: 4 Very Unloved kids bikes...** very battered, unusable kids bikes on offer, maybe suitable for someone wishing to undertake a major project. All will need new tyres, brakes, and a good scrub... Please only ask if you are sure you want these bikes and understand they are in a mess!"[iii]

> "**Balloon back chair needing repair** Pretty Victorian ballooon back chair with missing seat and damaged back support - good project for someone who knows what they are doing!"

This parallels the household DIY 'project' through which skill/competence/knowledge is distributed not merely between people but between people and things (e.g. DIY tools) so that "products and practices co-evolve" (Watson and Shove, 2008: 85). But in Freecycling, products move in order to evolve, to undergo moral re-ordering by the skills of members. Items are plastic, capable of re-invention and re-valuation through circular consumption, being shifted from 'unwanted' to 'wanted' registers, or re-imagined to suit a new task or setting: virtual and material practices are intimately entangled. As prosumers, Freecyclers (re)configure their own (unwanted, outgrown, used, unused) possessions as useful for others, co-creating value by bringing together production and consumption (Thrift, 2006).[iv] This co-creation or co-construction is performed between the 'offerer' and the 'taker', often by explicitly challenging other Freecyclers to reinvent items:

"**OFFERED - SMALL DOUBLE TROLLEY** on castors..... 2 shelves, suitable for a printer, small TV, or music centre...in fact use it for [what]ever you will."

"I have a small coffee table to offer. 23" square (59cm x 59cm) 24" High (60cm) dark wood, but will paint to any colour if you want to."

"I have a box of jewellery - plastic beads, earrings, hair slides and bands etc that are quite garish (cheap and nasty my mum would say....). Actually they're not that bad but would suit a little girl for dress up or fun."

In this way, consumption practices can be understood as prosumption practices, as "the constant tinkering of consumers with consumer goods" involves not only repair but also reinvention, customization and "redefinition" in idiosyncratic ways (Graham and Thrift, 2007: 6). A Freecycler offered "rubble" that could be useful as "hardcore for a garden patio base", making one item into another not through material repair or physical modification, but through re-imagining a change of use - from broken paving slabs into a garden: "I have lots of used bricks most have been cleaned and would [m]ake a great BBQ all so quite a bit of stone that would be good for a Rockery free to collect."

Items are therefore not only "stuff, but both raw material and product of consumers' imagination" (deNegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010b: 71), rendering some as 'blanks' upon or through which prosumers can construct value (Hetherington 2004). Re-valuing things, re-ordering them from 'unwanted' to 'wanted', "rescuing and resuscitating" goods (Gregson et al., 2007: 194) means that virtual posts also imagine items changing in the future. This leads us onto the second blurring of binaries.

Implosion 2: Digital/material and the circularity of exchange

As well as blurring production and consumption, prosumption also mixes the virtual/digital and the material. The virtual space of Freecycle is thus literally made by consumers and producers, filled by them with content (descriptions, photos) and meaning (broken, valuable) through diverse practices of offering, giving, collecting and receiving. These circulate and co-create not only goods but also values through "a space of flows" (Castells, 2000: 403) that link physical and imaginary worlds. This encourages us to understand 'virtual' consumption as not only purchasing material products online but also as imagining products and practices of consumption more generally (e.g. when browsing on eBay or in a high street shop), rendering online practices more clearly as part of re-imagining and redrawing what is means to be a consumer, and doing this collectively in a publicly viewable online space.

In this way, Freecycling also reflects recent work in practice theory (e.g. Shove et al., 2007, 2012; Warde, 2005), in that such practices (1) are shared but not homogeneous, (2) are repeated, (3) are performative of everyday social life, of time and space and of present and future worlds, through that repeated enactment and (4) can travel, especially through writings and rules, through learning and networking, both person-to-person and collectively online. And (5), practice theory suggests that, by repeated enactment, practices can become routine and increasingly difficult to challenge.

Applying this to Freecycling, we can see that digital technology enables users to link materials, meanings and skills – what Shove et al. (2012) refer to as 'elements of practice' – although in-person meetings to exchange products (and chat in the process) are also important. And in comparison to the hand-me-down economy (e.g. Gregson and Crewe, 2003), Freecyclers are not restricted to existing networks of friends and family or local charitable groups; instead, there may be thousands of other members in their Freecycle group, with some 'lurking' behind anonymous email addresses or only visiting the group briefly and sporadically when they have items to 'get rid of' rather than engaging regularly.

The fifth point in practice theory, routinisation, is especially important because it is a major obstacle to promoting sustainable and ethical consumption: if practices are routinised rather than clearly articulated

(which is rare in everyday life), they become very difficult to unthink or to think about doing differently; people may not realise that they are doing them at all or, if they do, they may not realise why they do them in particular ways. Many Freecyclers are motivated precisely by this challenge to re-think how people ordinarily consume, to re-order the morality of using, disposing to re-using, repairing and recycling, to overturn traditional hierarchies of worth. One group's website said: "Freecycle is an international grassroots environmental movement designed to minimise the amount of "stuff" we dump in our landfills. We do this by providing a forum for people to give their unused items to new, loving homes."

But, as I have suggested already, this is less about simply giving things away and more about circulating things through wider networks. Rather then simply being handed on, things are also transformed in this circular consumption, in terms of location, ownership and materiality (e.g. through being repaired by the receiver), but also transformed in terms of digital presence and how goods and practices are collectively imagined. In Freecycling, this circularity of digital and material exchange are often actively recognised and celebrated, where Freecyclers offer or request items for temporary ownership only, expecting to offer them round again on Freecycle when they are finished, e.g.:

> "**polite request baby walker** hi does anyone have a baby walker for my little girl no longer needed i can give it a good home and will re freecycle when finished with"

> "**Offered: Another computer job lot** more [PC] towers... motherboards/ power supplies... other bits and pieces TAKE THE LOT... NO PICKING! Freecycle what you can't use!"

> "**OFFERED - Electric cooker** this is a free standing 4 hob cooker with seperate grill. It is old but works perfectly, got this from another fellow freecycler about a year ago and have finally got round to upgrading so thought it would be a shame for it not to get re-freecycled"

Implosion 3: Mainstream/alternative and the sustainability and ethics of divestment

This takes us towards the the third blurring, that of the mainstream and alternative ways of doing things and the roles of ethics and morality. Digital consumption research (e.g. Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010a) has focussed on consumers buying virtual commodities in virtual reality games like 'Second Life', but also suggested that digital sites are "new means of consumption" because they may democratise consumption (and production), by resisting the pressures of mainstream consumer society (Ritzer 1999) and offering new (and usually positive) ways in which consumption can be understood and configured across time and space. In this way, a virtual 'alternative' space for more ethical, sustainable, fair or otherwise valued consumption may be set up against the dominant mainstream spaces and practices.

Challenging mainstream practices and impacts is a key aim of the literatures on 'alternative' models of the economy, also termed 'diverse economies' (e.g. Gibson-Graham 2006) or 'the solidarity economy' (Lemaître and Helmsing 2012; Miller 2006). These different rubrics cover a vast diversity of practices and organisations, from worker cooperatives in Brazil (Lemaître and Helmsing 2012) to urban agriculture in Canada. These diverse projects share an emphasis on valuing labour (rather than alienating it), local grassroots developments, cooperative or self-management, a focus on community and subsistence needs and democratising decision making (Bauhardt 2014).

However, most writing about 'the solidarity economy' is about practical projects, specifically their potential for social change and 'scaling up' their political organising into international networks (Miller 2006), rather than theoretical analysis (Bauhardt 2014, page 62). However, some of its ideas, such as shared values, can still be applied to Freecycling consumption practices. For example, the idea of developing into a social movement was mentioned by one Freecycle group on their log-in webpage (see above), but it was rarely evident in online posts. The solidarity economy's principle of reciprocity across the community was also evident where people posted both 'Offered' and 'Wanted' items, thus both

giving to and taking from their Freecycle group. Giving was also cast in a non-hierarchical way, as a sensible alternative to the rubbish bin, rather than a philanthropic or top-down gesture of charity to those less wealthy, again echoing ideas from the solidarity economy. However, because being active in Freecycling rarely builds 'social relationships', not least because of the relative anonymity of internet interactions, Freecycling does not really fulfil that condition of 'the solidarity economy' ideal.

Similarly, the wide literature on 'alternative' consumption emphasises that it takes many names, including ethical consumption, political consumption (Micheletti 2003), sustainable consumption (Pecoraro and Uusitalo 2014), fair trade (Barnett et al. 2010). It also takes many forms, often conceptualised as individual consumers shrugging off the habits of mainstream consumerism as part of building their own identities at a micro-level, but can also be analysed at a more collective or macro-level as part of changing governance and sharing responsibility (Micheletti, 2003, Barnett et al., 2010) or as cultural processes across groups (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014). However, this literature concentrates on conceptualising ethical consumption and its power relations, with the alternative economies literature concentrates more on production than consumption, with little work analysing how this supposed separation of the alternative from the mainstream works (or does not work) in practice. For example, very few consumers live purely alternative lives of voluntary simplicity: instead, sustainable consumption is threaded through with trade-offs, compromises and patching together very common and very uncommon styles of living and products.

The 'alternative' or 'diverse' economies literature also aims to challenge 'capitalocentrism' by opening up research agendas to analyse performative practices in particular (Gibson-Graham 2008, page 623). It is therefore important not to see Freecycling as some neatly compartmentalised and idealised 'alternative' economic model which circulates around its own ethics and practices. Rather, it is one of many possible 'performative economies', shaped not through the dominant role of producers and retailers, but through multiple, complex, incomplete and shifting knowledge practices. Following the practices of Freecycling, as I do in this paper, shows that the ideals of alternative consumption are not pure and contained within so-called 'alternative' networks, but are blurred across diverse practices.

For example, Nelson et al. (2007) posited Freecycling as part of a backlash against the demoralising values of hegemonic consumerism, i.e. unethical, materialistic, hedonistic and self-interested consumption. This relies on an implicit binary between the mainstream and the alternative, where 'mainstream' stands for typically market-oriented spaces and practices and 'alternative' for supposedly more sustainable, less materialistic spaces and practices. In contrast, I would argue that Freecycling blurs this mainstream/alternative binary in an implosion of moral certainties: things are offered not for sale or even swapping or barter, but for handing over, exchanging and gifting (one Freecycle group's webpage specifically refers to members 'gifting' items) and this is morally 'good', yet things are also asked for, often very desirable consumerist objects, such as laptop computers, smartphones and dishwashers.

This echoes ideals of reciprocity (e.g.) in models of alternative/solidarity economies, where reciprocity is based on social ties, especially in the local community, wherein those who receive gifts are also expected to give gifts, thus mixing "altruism and self-interest" (Lemaître and Helmsing 2012, page 747).

As part of blurring mainstream and alternative consumption, Freecycle also blurs the binary between consuming and de-consuming, between getting things and getting rid of things. Disposal of post-consumer waste has been analysed in the last ten years and increasingly shown to be integral to consumption (Hetherington, 2004: 158). To put it another way, how we de-consume deserves study just as much as how we consume, because each is a part of the other and because de-consuming shapes our social relations and material worlds, as well as impacting on sustainability and ethical questions. Recent work addresses this by analysing disposal, de-consuming and what Gregson calls 'divestment' via municipal rubbish collection, recycling systems, charity or thrift shops and friends and family (Bulkeley and Gregson, 2009; Gregson et al., 2007; Gregson and Crang, 2010).

In Freecycling, goods are consumed as they are disposed of, thus blurring consumption/disposal in favour of more circular consumption. But one major difference from analyses of the secondhand economy is that things are not merely handed on (given away) through Freecycling because they are *unwanted*, but (used/secondhand) things are deliberately requested because they are *wanted*. Here is a typical example of a (very) broken appliance that was 'Offered' on Freecycle:

> "**OFFERED: Canon i70 laptop printer for parts or repair** Great laptop printer in a compact, easily portable size you can't find readily any more. All cables, manuals, CD, even extra cartridges and box included... Only catch: it doesn't work, and it's not a non-techie fix. If you know anything about replacing waste ink reservoirs or are willing to learn, the whole package is all yours."

Despite seeming unattractive, this item was reported online as 'Taken' later the same day. Freecycling thus facilitates not merely the donation of goods but also the demand for goods – the explicit 'wish lists' seen online in many review sites like Amazon are in Freecycle often materialised through donation. And this includes 'high-tech' items like printers as well as 'low-tech' items like wooden chairs – there is no clear distinction here. 'Hand-me-downs' are thus actively created, rather than passively received, becoming in this sense more like new goods than old stuff. Perhaps more surprising to those outside Freecycle is how often 'Wanted' posts ask for items that are broken or can be broken:

> "**ANYBODY HAVE ANY BROKEN WATCH BITS.....??** that they no longer want or need....I can use them"

> "Wanted, a garden shed, or bits of one, for our allotment. Condition does not matter at all so long as it is repairable and can be made usable. We can take it down and clear everything away for you"

This visibility of online demand even for recognisably broken or unwanted goods collapses a simplistic category of waste as 'post-consumption' and recirculates value through the 'hand-me-down' or 'hand-around' economy, emphasising the material donation of goods through known social networks and replacing "linear trajectories" with "open-ended webs of potential connectivity" (Gregson et al., 2007: 198). Secondhand consumption challenges the assumption of a throwaway society, of the traditional and inevitable linear trajectory of goods from shops to homes to rubbish bins (Gregson and Crewe 2003) and emphasises instead reusing, recycling and re-conceptualising goods in more sustainable ways.

Items on Freecycle are thus plastic, being re-imagined through circulating consumption, shifting across moral registers from 'wanted' to 'unwanted', from 'bad' to 'good' and back again as diverse consumers purchase, handle, pass on and repair them. This 'moral economy' (Sayer, 2003) is also a circular economy; it enables re-pair and re-valuation where the worth of goods can be increased by looping through different practices, rather than a linear economy based on entropy where worth can only decline as goods move towards disposal. It also performs moral re-ordering as part of this circularity.

As well as moral ordering of goods, Freecycling practises the moral ordering of people as consumers, reflecting also the digital construction of a different online persona mentioned above. Multiple representations of the 'good' consumer, or moral 'narratives of the self' (Barnett et al. 2011), are either directly expressed through the wording of Freecycle posts, or are clearly implied. The most common is *the frugal householder*, who dislikes waste on principle and therefore offers even lowly and mundane items in the hope that someone (else) will value them and turn de-consumption into re-consumption, mixing the pleasures of donation with the regret of disposal:

> "**Offered: taps and bath panel** I have 2 sets of brand new taps and brand new White plastic bath panel if anyone could use them. It would be a shame to throw them."

There is also *the creative self*, e.g. the cook who says they will give a good home to kitchen items like bread-makers and pasta-makers:

> "**WANTED: Pasta maker/roller-thingie** If anyone has one of those gadgets you roll out pasta dough with sitting gathering dust in a corner, I'd be delighted to take it off your hands." (later posted as 'Received')

Other imagined selves are the *low-income household* (especially students), who beg sympathy for their plight and make themselves worthy recipients of goods, the *sustainable consumer*, who dislikes waste on environmental grounds and the *generous neighbour*, who wants others to enjoy products that they have enjoyed. Freecycling thus allows consumers to re-imagine and re-present themselves (and others) as both consumer *and* producer, offerer *and* receiver, benevolent *and* desirous, again echoing ideals of the solidarity economy through the principle of reciprocity across the community.

Similar re-enchantment (Ritzer, 1999) of mundane consumption has been identified through the excitement, pleasure and 'arousal' in the emotional experience created by the searching and bidding process on eBay (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010a). By comparison, Freecyclers seem to gain pleasure through consumption in multiple ways: first, there is the pleasure of generously giving; second, there is the pleasure of 'getting rid' of stuff; third, there is the pleasure of receiving things for free; and fourth, there is the pleasure of being part of a community, of making friends through chatting online and (more occasionally) swapping items. Some Freecyclers also post 'Wanted' requests on behalf of 'worthy' causes and charities, e.g. a local hospice, school or playgroup, or construct 'worthy' recipients by describing friends or family members (for whom 'Wanted' requests are posted) as being on low incomes, single mothers, students or elderly. Others qualify 'Offer' posts by asking that their unwanted items going 'to a good home' or to someone who could not otherwise afford them.

Some of these pleasures echo the values of traditional consumerism, but others challenge them or at least complicate the relationship between having, wanting and refusing. So, both consuming and de-consuming (disposing) are pleasurable, challenging the notion that being thrifty, ethically sound and green means sacrifice rather than fun. This reflects Soper's concept of 'alternative hedonism,' where having less can itself be fun, even "a distinctively moral form of self-pleasuring or a self-interested form of altruism: that which takes pleasure in committing to a more socially accountable mode of consuming" (Soper, 2007: 213). This blurs the familiar consumer/citizen dichotomy that often underlies criticisms of sustainable consumption, because it argues that self-interest can be fulfilled not by having more (or better or cheaper) things, but by having (or doing) 'good' things. Here, the re-enchantment (Ritzer, 1999) of consumption is proposed to occur not through spectacle and extravagance, but through thrift, reinvention and moralisation. So even the purchase of ethical and environmental goods can be seen as pleasurable and even self-interested where it is used to claim status and virtue (Soper 2007). Nelson et al (2007) argued that US Freecyclers can be seen as downshifters, who are deliberately restyling their lives and their identities away from hedonistic consumption to simpler ways of living, again emphasising that having less may be constructed as a positive and pleasurable consumer choice.

But Freecycling *also* demonstrates hedonistic desires, with 'Wanted' posts often seeking materialistic goods, especially electronics, for free. Table 2 shows the types of goods in 'Offer' posts (thus 'unwanted') compared to 'Wanted' posts. Some 'Wanted' posts express traditionally consumerist desires, e.g. for dishwashers, mobile phones, laptop computers, leather sofas, some even specifying that items should be working and in good condition. These are not people merely picking up the debris divested from other people's lives; rather they are actively voicing their desires in a common consumerist register, such as seeking the latest computing and audiovisual equipment (prompted perhaps by UK's move to digital broadcasting signals, mentioned in my opening vignette).

There are also morally 'bad' representations of the consumer, self-expressed or implied on Freecycle, such as the *unskilled or lazy householder*, who is incapable of fixing broken items (but hopes someone else can):

Table 2. Types of items offered and requested in a Freecycle group in May 2013.

	Number of times on 'Offer'	Number of times 'Wanted'
Audiovisual equipment *(e.g. televisions, video recorders, DVD players, personal music players, radios, tapes, DVDs, settop (digital reception) boxes, games boxes, sometimes broken, and chargers)*	51	9
Computer devices *(e.g. laptops, hard drives, printers, cables, software and chargers)*	28	14
Large household electrical items *(especially washing machines, fridges and freezers but also dishwashers, large ovens, microwave ovens)*	10	13
Small household electrical items *(e.g. irons, vacuum cleaners, coffee makers, cameras, breadmakers, phones and chargers)*	24	9
Furniture *(e.g. chairs, tables, lamps, mirrors, baths, taps)*	172	20
Other household items *(e.g. kitchen utensils, curtains, rugs, blankets, duvets, luggage)*	100	14
Clothes *(including dressmaking equipment, fabric, jewellery, shoes and coathangers)*	50	15
Books and toys *(including magazines, newspapers, sports equipment, pet equipment, baby equipment and musical instruments)*	195	22
Vehicles *(especially bicycles but also pushchairs, buggies, roof racks for cars, trailers and other attachments)*	20	19
Gardening items *(e.g. plants, seeds, pots, tools, pond linings, lawn mowers, flagstones, sand and gravel and firewood)*	55	26
Non-gardening and DIY items *(e.g. tools, paint, tiles, carpet, wood, roofing felt)*	52	24
Packaging boxes, bags and wrapping *(especially for people moving house or putting possessions into long-term storage)*	11	6
Tents and camping items	1	4
Other *(especially vouchers or unused tickets for trains or shows)*	38	7

*Notes: All calculations by the author. Counts represent number of **posts** mentioning a category, not number of **items** offered. Ratio of offered:wanted posts is about 2:1.*

"**Offered** I have a [jigsaw] puzz[le in] 3d of tower bridge ,looks quite hard we don;'t have time to do it but sure it would be great for someone. the contents have never been opened"

And there is frequent disgust and disapproval expressed also about *time-wasters* who do not collect items when they say they will, e.g.:

"we have a trampoline for up to 3 yrs old if anyone wants it. (please only email me if you will call me to arrange collection after I email you my phone number i a have had lots of time wasters recently and would like to give my stuff to people who genuinely want it)"

Another morally dubious self is *the demanding materialist*, who is (by implication) too hedonistic in posting unrealistic requests for too-desirable consumer goods. A particularly detailed example follows:

"**Wanted: Pine Bedside Cabinets and other bits...** Hi guys, ill just say thanks in advance to any offers I may receive, me and my partner are moving into our first flat on friday and needs a few bits of furniture really...listed below, I know its a BIG favor to ask but money is short and we could do with some things. Again, thanks in advance for whatever offers I may get! 1. Matching pair of pine or oak bedside cabinets, preferably the type with 3 drawers. 2. A brown leather or brown cloth 2 seat sofa 3. Some sort of chair to use in the bedroom, again preferably brown cloth or leather. 4. Some sort of DVD display cabinet with glass front maybe. Again, I know this is a HUGE thing to ask for but it would be ever so appreciated if anyone can help!"

To support the morally worthy consumer, the virtual space of Freecycle is explicitly regulated by moderators as a non-commercial space; consuming is understood in the wider sense of *using*, rather than the narrower sense of *shopping* - there should be no purchase involved and no money changing hands. As on other online sites, this constructs "an *experiential space* that is actively produced and negotiated through both the discursive practices of its creators and the cognition of its surfers" (Currah, 2003: 9, italics in original). Non-commercialisation[v] is enforced through the explicit (n)etiquette of Freecycle groups that in principle means: no trading, no offering money in 'Wanted' posts, no expecting payment in 'Offered' posts, no begging for cash. Moderators repeatedly post reminders about these rules, e.g.:

"Please don't advertise anything which you expect to get money for, and please don't use this list to advertise events... NO POLITICS, NO SPAM, NO MONEY, NO PERSONAL ATTACKS/ RUDENESS. Two strikes & you're out, i.e. you will be unsubscribed by the moderator after two inappropriate postings."

"items for sale, borrowed or swapped are not permitted on freecycle, anyone who does not stick to the rules will be given a warning and if they continue to break the rules will be removed from freecycle."

These principles are often reinforced in posts by members, who try to prevent this non-commercial concept of Freecycle being undermined by traders getting stuff for free and then selling it for profit, quite possibly elsewhere online, e.g. through eBay. In the following example, the possession (consumption) of expensive consumer items is used as a signifier of being 'unworthy' to receive even unwanted items on Freecycle:

"**OFFERED - Cane Chair & 2 seater settee...** Anyone who claims poverty but sends messages from a blackberry or i-phone will not be considered. Anyone who turns up in a white van with Thomson's auctioneers tickets strewn across the floor will be turned away. In other words NO DEALERS!!!!! !!!!"

Moderators aim to regulate the virtual space of Freecycle to exclude such monetarisation - only material goods should change hands and circulate through consumption. This more radical interpretation of non-

monetary consumption constrasts with the 'second hand cultures' of Gregson and Crewe (2003), where 'retro retailing' in car boot sales, charity shops and vintage boutiques involves monetary exchange and therefore profit in a more traditional capitalist mode.

In studing 'offline' gift economies of hand-me-down and hand-me-round objects, Gregson and Crewe (2003: 106) consider that their empirical evidence is only "equivocal at best" about whether divestment and secondhand consumption practices are really alternative or reduce consumption overall: sometimes getting rid of stuff allows people more room to get more stuff. And even secondhand consumption still reflects and uses the practices and spaces of firsthand consumption, such as conventions of retail display, branding, profit-seeking and commodification as expressions of capitalist hegemony in modern society. Online practices of Freecycle groups demonstrate this very clearly when postings use 'mainstream' descriptions to re-value unwanted items in this supposedly sustainable, alternative space. For example, 'Offer' posts sometimes include a hyperlink to the original retailer of the offered item or one very like it:

> "Good quality cot bed. Suitable from birth to 5 years old.See link to the Argos website http://www.argos. co.uk/static/ Product/partNumb er/3773420/ c_1/1|category_root| Nursery|14417537 /c_2/2|14417537| Cots%2C+nursery+ furniture+ and+bedding| 14417580/ c_3/3|cat_ 14417580| Cots|14417587.htm" (reported 'Taken' immediately: "I was flooded with emails!")

Such posts invoke the repertoire (the direct visual and verbal vocabulary) of mainstream retailing, bringing it only one click away from the (supposedly) alternative exchange space. This blurs both digital/material and mainstream/alternative repertoires, and emphasises that such distinctions are both inaccurate and analytically unhelpful. And in a further blurring of the divide between markets and non-markets, one Freecycle group's website also hosted sponsored links above the search engine boxes, e.g. "SPONSOR RESULTS: ConsumerSearch.com - Compare and Save Now - Read Our Reviews and Shop With Confidence[;] shopping.yahoo.com - Outdoor Living Items at Yahoo!"

The only monetary exchange that moderators explicitly allow to follow from Freecycling is when revaluing, repairing and reinventing can turn something of no monetary value into something of monetary value, at which point members are 'allowed' (although, in practice, moderators have little control over what members actually do with items...) to sell Freecycled items for money. So money enters Freecycle's circular consumption only (ideally, that is) through the skill and labour of the consumer, who thereby becomes more explicitly a prosumer:

> "When requesting an item with a WANTED post, or when responding to another member's OFFERED post, please state whether you will be selling the item. In general, it is NOT all right to take an item for free just to sell it on ebay, at a flea market, or elsewhere. There are people who may truly and personally benefit from the item, and if it were going to be sold, the person offering it might have done so. When it's offered out of kindness, please do not abuse it.

> However, there are some circumstances in which it might be acceptable for you to resell an item (i.e. you repair broken appliances and might be able to fix it up and resell it). If your situation might be something like this, please just state it in your request or when you email an offeror. If you are found to be reselling freecycled items without appropriately disclosing your intentions, you may be banned from the list."

Re-selling by charitable causes is another exception that is permitted on Freecycle, e.g. "[Named] School PTA are holding a Jumble Sale this coming Saturday... and would love any of the following items to sell; Adult and children's clothing Books Toys and Games DVD's Bric-a-Brac." By implication, people could have already considered or actively tried divesting their items through these marketised channels but only as a last resort turned to Freecycle, when items proved unworthy of re-selling:

> "**Offered: Pelican history of England** Volumes 4-8 with some duplicates and some other history related paperbacks - elderly but needing a loving and appreciative home - and no - they aren't worth anything on Amazon, Ebay etc. or I would have donated them to a charity!" (20 May)

And although 'money-making' is therefore explicitly forbidden on Freecycle, there is little political critique of capitalism expressed there, leaving only philanthropy and 'giving things a good home' as the implicit ideology for donation.

Discussion

Freecycling is part of a long history of 'free' goods online; indeed, the origins of the Internet have been seen as a rejection of capitalistic accumulation, profit maximization and materialism in favour of counter-cultural values of openness and sharing (e.g. of free software). Similar arguments have also been made about online consumption generally, as challenging mainstream hegemonic consumption practices. For example, Leyshon (2003: 553) argued that Napster "is certainly not a utopian alternative to capitalism, but is seen by some of its influential participants as a precursor to a more distributed, more efficient market economy, with a strong libertarian edge."

But in reality Freecycling practices are far more blurred and 'the gift economy' model (perhaps surprisingly) does not fit well. First, Freecycling does not build social relationships on reciprocity - goods donated via Freecycle are alienable and transferable without reciprocity. Like peer-to-peer sharing of music online, it is more like mainstream markets than is often assumed in the alternative economies literature, because "these communities are relatively impersonal and anonymous [and] these objects circulate more like quasi-commodities than like gifts" (Leyshon 2003: 554).

Freecycling thus demonstrates that divisions between digital and material, between consumption and disposal, between mainstream and alternative consumption, between gift and commodity, between wanted and unwanted goods are in practice blurred and continually remade by exchange between consumers. This is further enabled by online exchanges which allow consumers to re-imagine their items (and themselves) in new ways and to re-design and re-market them for re-use, through the moral re-ordering of what it means to be a 'good' consumer or a 'good' item.

These diverse practices effect three implosions of key binaries: 1) consumption/production; 2) digital/material; 3) mainstream/alternative. Freecycling is thus prosumptive, rather than solely consumptive, and this prosumption is performed through digital and material practices of exchange and moral ordering. It is also circular, challenging the linearity of traditional perspectives on waste disposal, but also pulling mainstream retailing and consuming vocabularies and representations into a supposedly alternative, ethically and environmentally driven space. I use 'circular consumption' to capture these non-linear, non-binary processes of re-valuing and exchanging. This also resonates with practice theory because circular consumption emphasises the repeated enactment and interactions between things, skills (both virtual in the form of online postings and material in the form of repair) and people and this collective circularity creates and re-creates value of/through things.

I have also cast Freecycling as an example of prosumption, as "we will find it increasingly difficult to differentiate between production and consumption; between producers and consumers" in future (Ritzer, 2014: page 19). This is particularly challenging because it requires us to integrate the often disparate literatures on sustainable consumption, digital consumption and practice theory and bring them to bear on the multi-faceted experience of recycling and exchanging goods online. It also means that we need to analyse sustainable consumption not only as hedonistic and pleasurable, as Soper suggested, but also as blurring the highly artificial dichotomy often posited between 'mainstream' and 'alternative' consumer practices. Instead, sustainable and ethical consumption are part of the bundling of consumption practices, in messy and overlapping ways, rather than a challenge to mainstream practices. The ongoing online engagement with diverse practices of designing, advertising and re-

imagining products through Freecycling is therefore a call to move beyond binaries and clearly defined spaces of different consumptive practices. Instead, we should follow the practices and goods themselves as they move through and help to construct social and cultural meanings and moral orderings, which then shape the materialities of how we use things today.

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Acknowledgements

[i] "[Town]-Freegle kept at least 9464kg out of landfill and incinerators in the last 31 days, we reckon. That's the same as 38008 stunt kites. Help us keep track by posting TAKENs and RECEIVEDs." (Email Digest, 10th February 2014)

[ii] Due to disputes over Yahoo's hosting of Freecycle online since 2009, some Freecycle groups have converted to Freegle groups, including one of the groups that I analysed. However, the group retained nearly all of their ethos and their practices remained very similar, hence I use 'Freecycle' to refer to both types of groups.

[iii] When quoting posts, I have put the subject heading in bold and corrected spelling and grammar only where messages were difficult to understand in their original format. Any other textual errors originate with the posters: posts varied from being error-free to barely understandable due to 'text-speak' or mistyping.

[iv] Callon (2007) also refers to how products are co-constructed by users through 'techno-economic networks', but he refers explicitly to 'markets' and things for sale, which (as we will see) is not allowed in Freecycle.

[v] There are parallels here with the arguments that digital prosumers are being exploited by capitalists such as Amazon and other commercial retailers, because they are creating value and advertising for free.