

The rise of “sharing” in communication and media studies

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In May 2014, a group of scholars came together to discuss sharing and its meanings in the digital era. Some of these scholars had been enquiring into the meaning of sharing for some time; others saw the call for papers for a conference on the topic of sharing as an opportunity to frame their work in terms of a concept that offered the potential for new insights and fresh paths of analysis. All of them presented rich analyses and critiques of practices of sharing and of the rhetoric of the word “sharing.” These analyses sometimes overlapped in their conceptualizations of sharing, and sometimes they complemented or even challenged one another. Taken together, though, they all showed that there is a need—and a desire—to get to grips with sharing, if only because of the word’s seeming omnipresence in a wide range of digital and non-digital contexts. This special issue showcases some of the work presented at the ICA pre-conference, *Sharing: A Keyword for the Digital Age*.

This is not the first collection of articles about sharing; nor, surely, will it be the last. In 2011 a special issue of the *International Review of Information Ethics* was devoted to the Ethics of Sharing (Stalder & Sützl, 2011); and in 2012 a

collection of papers was published (Sützl, Stalder, Maier, & Hug, 2012) based on a conference titled, *The Cultures and Ethics of Sharing*. This emerging field of interdisciplinary research has been fueled by interest in Russell Belk's seminal article, *Sharing* (Belk, 2010), which serves as a reference point for much of the research about sharing carried out since its publication.

Acknowledgment—albeit implicit—of the importance of sharing can also be seen in its increasingly prominent place in recent literature on social media. Meikle and Young (2011), for instance, discuss sharing as one of the principles of convergence culture (along with collaboration, etc.). Van Dijck (2013) devotes a chapter to Facebook and what she terms “the imperative of sharing”. More recently, Brake (2014) has published the book, *Sharing our Lives Online*—a title that neatly captures some of the different meanings of “sharing” that the authors of the papers in this special issue also wrangle with: when I share my life with another online, I am both *distributing* digital materials to them and *communicating* about my life to them.

Sharing, then, has clearly been making its way into the research agendas of students of digital culture, but research into sharing as such remains scant (see Kennedy, this issue, for a review of it). Indeed, as Russell Belk (2010) has pointed out, there has even been a reluctance to study sharing. According to him, one reason is that sharing is so ubiquitous that we take it for granted and do not deem it worthy of consideration. Add to this the fact that sharing is readily associated with the intimate, private sphere, with the “home, rather than the exterior worlds of work and the market” (p. 716) and a long-standing gender bias further removes sharing from the visibility range of the social sciences.

In addition, though, as Belk also points out, sharing has remained obscure because of rationalist assumptions about human behavior. In particular, the notion that we have a natural inclination to act from selfish motivations has led us to assume that we can understand most social phenomena, including sharing, in terms of *exchange*, be that economic exchange pure and simple, or gift exchange. Indeed, much of the early literature on file sharing was conceptualized as a kind of gift exchange (see, for example, Giesler, 2006), not to mention early accounts of the entire internet as such a system (such as Ghosh, 2005).

This blindness towards sharing—which we suggest is an outcome of the predominance of the exchange principle—runs deep. Exchange is limited neither to economics, nor to the present. Indeed, the roots of a moral economy based on retribution can be found in early religious scriptures and their ideas of justice as payment in kind (Sloterdijk, 2010). The exchange principle has formed the modern worldview and modern-day institutions. It has given rise to an unforgiving present where everything must have an equivalent. The usage of the word “loser” for someone who fails to conduct him/herself accordingly still carries a moral-economic double entendre: economic failure and social marginalization amount to the same. If we see the cynicism in this, it is because sharing has never disappeared from our social practice nor from our thinking, and it would also explain why we think of sharing as a “nice” and “pro-social behavior” (Benkler, 2004). It would be hard to think of sharing as dividing people into winners and losers; instead, it reiterates a bond, a kind of commonality that engages our very being-in-the-world as being-with-one-another. Therefore, sharing is not possible without communication, and this may be one way of understanding why sharing has become so important in the

context of digital communication technologies. Sharing, then, defines a way of relating to others, of communicating. So how can we begin to study sharing?

There are a number of non-exclusive ways that one can talk about sharing. One is to talk descriptively, or emically, about the word: its etymology, its layers of meanings, the mental associations it ignites. For this approach, the key question is, What do we mean when we use the word “sharing”? Without launching here into a full exposition, it would seem relevant to note that today—but probably not one hundred years ago—“sharing” refers both to acts of distribution and to acts of communication (the newer of the two senses of sharing) (John, 2013b).

Another is to try and define the boundaries of sharing as a category of action. Here, the key question is, What is sharing? This requires a set of criteria, however loose, against which activities can be judged. These criteria may be debated: for some, sharing is a reciprocal act (Katriel, 1987), while for others reciprocity is not necessarily implied by sharing (see Kennedy, 2014); or, one might wish to argue that if money passes hands, then the interaction cannot be defined as sharing (Belk, 2014). While the criteria themselves may be deliberated, this approach to sharing starts with a definition—or something approaching a definition—and then asks whether certain practices fall under the category of sharing, or whether they constitute something else (on the boundaries between sharing and borrowing, for instance, see Jenkins, Molesworth, & Scullion, 2014).

This, then, invites another way of talking about “sharing”, namely, critiquing its deployment by commercial entities as an ideological tool for mystifying their modus operandi (John, 2013a). For many, the dissonance

between “sharing” as what media companies call what we do on and with social media versus the business model or perceived social outcomes of social media platforms is too great. We are subjected to the imperative, “Share!”, by commercial bodies that wish to exploit us, and by government agencies that seek to monitor our communications. From this perspective, “sharing”—both the online practice, and the use of the word itself—is adding fuel to a sociotechnical system that limits our autonomy by linking communication to the logic of neoliberalism (Banning, this issue).

However, and finally, one might also talk about sharing as representing a challenge to the capitalist status quo, a social and cultural form that sets limits to the exchange economy—limits that define sharing as an anti-economy that unhinges every system of exchange. According to this perspective, the “sharing economy” is a contradiction in terms (Sützl, 2014). To use the word here is to do so non-reflexively, without the scare quotes that so often appear in discussions of sharing—especially among those who wish to adopt an ironic or critical stance towards the word (Predelli, 2003).

How is the word used by the contributors to this special issue? For Kelly Quinn and Renee Powers, the word’s semantic fields are the very object of their research. They map different contexts of use for the word in readers’ comments’ to New York Times articles, showing its variety of meanings and the work that it does as a concept. In particular, they consider sharing in relation to the notion of privacy, concluding that the latter should not be normatively counter-posed against the former. Ultimately, sharing is understood as an important component in our reflexive stance towards the self, or as a dimension of subjectivity.

While taking a very different methodological approach, Jenny Kennedy also seeks to understand what the concept of “sharing” means to people. Specifically, she explores the imaginaries of sharing in network culture, while also seeking to understand sharing by studying it as a media practice. Kennedy’s article offers a rich theoreticization of contemporary practices of sharing, bringing file-sharing, affective sharing, the sharing economy and digital sharing within her scope. The result is a powerful call for further research of sharing practices.

Katharina Lobinger’s contribution also recognizes that the word “sharing” activates different layers of meaning, highlighting its usage as a type of communication. Her paper unpacks the concept of sharing as a strategy for arriving at new insights about existing phenomena. Lobinger identifies distinct semantic fields of the word “sharing”, which enables her to posit some fresh insights into practices of photo sharing. Picking up on the distinction between sharing as a form of distribution and sharing as a form of communication, Lobinger draws our attention to the difference between using a photo to tell a story and the photo itself being the story, the message that is communicated. For Lobinger, then, paying close attention to the meanings of “sharing” is a fruitful analytic strategy.

Marlia Banning examines digital sharing in the context of a “close alignment between neoliberal capitalism and digital communication.” The digital culture of sharing, according to her, is impossible to disentangle from the logic of “info-liberalism,” where the creation of value is separated from any wage payments. According to Banning, digital sharing works this way because it is part of an economy of affectivity involving automatisms on the cognitive and

technological levels, turning Web 2.0 users into communicative laborers. Digital sharing, accordingly, is both voluntary and involuntary—as users share content and affects online, so they become shared subjects. Banning understands social media as an apparatus in the Foucauldian sense in which the affective qualities of sharing help to render exploitative automatisms invisible.

Yet manifestations of the anti-economic qualities of sharing return in surprising ways in digital culture. Aram Sinnreich's contribution concerns itself with such a case: the followers of Kopimism, an officially recognized religion in Sweden since 2012, consider the copying and sharing of information as a sacred act. Intending to subvert the hegemonic dominance of copyright law, Kopimists form part of a pirate culture with roots in northern Europe. Although read as a prank by many, Sinnreich's interviews with Kopimists and his analysis of Kopimist documents show that this religion has antecedents in Christianity's spreading the word of God through copying. The idea of economizing information through copyright, the "religion of copyright," would stand in opposition to what the Kopimists hold to be the sacredness of information. Drawing on sources that have their origin before the generalization of economic exchange, Kopimists envision a world of communal property and "unconditional datalove."

Finally, Kristen Barta and Gina Neff examine the sharing of personal data in the context of the Quantified Self (QS) movement. For them, these highly technologically mediated acts of sharing are constitutive of community. At the same time, though, QS communities exist within a broadly commercial context. Observing QS members' take on this fact—and it is quite clear that the community is fully cognizant of the presence of commercial bodies—enables

Barta and Neff to present a nuanced approach to the problem of “sharing” in commercial contexts. Indeed, they argue, this ambiguity is constitutive of the QS scene as a whole.

Taken together, these articles reflect a growing interest in the concept and practices of sharing as they have been taking shape over recent years. Their focus is on digital life, but the themes that concern them are the issues that have long concerned us all: communication, community, the self, inequalities, and more. While researchers in fields adjacent to ours—consumption studies, social psychology, economics, anthropology—are also expanding understandings of sharing, we hope that this Special Issue provides a touchstone for the kinds of work that communication scholars are producing around the notion of sharing.

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