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Sharing, collaborative consumption and Web 2.0

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the connection between collaborative consumption and technology, in particular the internet, smartphones and social network sites (SNSs). Based on a content analysis of 63 newspaper articles about collaborative consumption, it is argued that collaborative consumption is constructed as a high-tech phenomenon in three main ways: first, technology is depicted as *enabling* collaborative consumption; second, technology is said to be *driving* collaborative consumption, as it is argued that online practices of sharing (on Twitter and Facebook) are encouraging offline practices of sharing; and third, the *terminology and metaphors* used in talk about collaborative consumption can be seen as deriving from the world of high-tech start-ups.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the connection between collaborative consumption and technology, in particular the internet, smartphones and social network sites (SNSs). Based on content analysis of 63 newspaper articles about collaborative consumption, it is argued that collaborative consumption is constructed as a high-tech phenomenon in three main ways: first, technology is depicted as *enabling* collaborative consumption; second, technology is said to be *driving* collaborative consumption, as it is argued that online practices of sharing (on Twitter and Facebook) are encouraging offline practices of sharing; and third, the *terminology and metaphors* used in talk about collaborative consumption can be seen as deriving from the world of high-tech start-ups.

This study of collaborative consumption is part of a larger research project into sharing (see especially Belk, 2010) as a keyword for today's society (for a preliminary overview, see John, 2013-b; on the concept of keywords, see Williams, 1983). Sharing is the constitutive activity of Web 2.0 (John, 2013-b), and is the word that describes the mode of our participation in SNSs and digital communication more generally. But it is a word with a powerful set of associations: put bluntly, sharing is, by definition, good (hence, for example, the struggle over the framing of the piracy/file sharing debate (John, Forthcoming). However, if sharing is a type of *communication* characteristic of our participation in contemporary ICTs, it is also a type of *economic activity*, as connoted by the term 'sharing economies', which can be of production or consumption. Sharing economies of production are typified by Wikipedia and Linux, as analyzed by Yochai Benkler (2006, 2011).

Sharing economies of consumption will be discussed in greater detail below, though for now let us note that they entail a form of consumption characterized by an emphasis on community and interpersonal relations, on financial prudence, and on concern for the environment. In this regard, sharing economies of consumption have much in common with ethical consumerism. As I show in this paper, collaborative consumption, a movement currently in the ascendency in the US and elsewhere around the world,[1] and which conceives of itself as forming part of a new global sharing economy, is also characterized by a very close affinity to contemporary communication technologies.

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[1] *Time* magazine declared collaborative consumption one of "10 ideas that will change the world" (Walsh, 2011).

WHAT IS COLLABORATIVE CONSUMPTION?

According to the somewhat irreverent, but nonetheless relevant website for neologisms, Word Spy, collaborative consumption is '[a]n economic model in which consumers use online tools to collaborate on owning, renting, sharing, and trading goods and services'.[2] This is a good definition of the term, and one that accords well with that offered by the Collaborative Consumption Hub, the website that accompanies the book, *What's Mine is Yours* (Botsman & Rogers, 2010), whereby collaborative consumption is said to describe 'the rapid explosion in swapping, sharing, bartering, trading and renting being reinvented through the latest technologies and peer-to-peer marketplaces in ways and on a scale never possible before'.[3] While the practices incorporated by collaborative consumption overlap in these two definitions, it is noteworthy that they refer to 'online tools' and 'the latest technologies' respectively, suggesting that there is something inherently digital about collaborative consumption. This paper inquires precisely into the nature of the digitalism of collaborative consumption, asking how the relations between this new-old type of ethical consumption and information and communication technologies in general, and Web 2.0 in particular, are constructed in newspaper articles about collaborative consumption.

As noted above, the collaborative consumption movement is part of what are known as sharing economies. Sharing economies operate outside of conventional capitalism—hence sharing, swapping, bartering, and so on.[4] Of course, the presence of non-capitalist markets operating within a general context of capitalism is not new, as exemplified by institutional models such as the kibbutz movement in Israel, and especially its modern urban version (see Horrox, 2010), or the communes of the American counter-culture of the 1960s and '70s. Non-institutionalized forms of sharing economies of consumption are also easy to observe, including as they do car boot sales, hand-me-down clothes, second-hand stores, borrowing and lending between neighbors, and so on. Indeed, as we shall see below, some commentators see today's collaborative consumption as a return to age-old behaviors.

In their manifestos, the proponents of collaborative consumption echo oft-heard critiques of consumerism in capitalist societies. For instance, Botsman and Rogers (2010) present a familiar litany of complaints regarding modern consumerism: it creates huge amounts of trash and is wasteful of the world's limited resources; it encourages us to horde and fetishize stuff that does not make us happy anyway; and it turns us into vicious, animalistic creatures

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[2] http://www.wordspy.com/words/collaborativeconsumption.asp, accessed 22/4/2012, cited in *The Toronto Star*, 16/5/2010.

[3] http://collaborativeconsumption.com, accessed 22/4/2012.

[4] The question of how long they will continue to operate outside of capitalism is not discussed here, though it is by no means a moot issue.

(here they tell the story of the Valley Stream Wal-Mart stampede of 2008, in which a store employee lost his life) who care more about owning things than their relationships with other people (or as they put it, 'the things you own end up owning you' (ibid: 15)). However, rather than proposing a radically alternative social order, collaborative consumption aims at offering the same 'pleasures of ownership' as regular consumerism, but 'with reduced personal cost and burden, and lower environmental impact'.[5]

METHODOLOGY

The research presented in this article uses methods associated with grounded theory, whereby the field is approached without a preformed theory to be tested in light of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is especially suitable for the research presented here: as mentioned above, the stimulus for the research was the observation that the motif of technology is recurrent in presentations of collaborative consumption, and the preliminary objective of the study was to understand and characterize this motif with no prior commitment to any particular theory. This is not to say that one approaches the field with no knowledge of it or the theoretical issues that may be pertinent to it. Indeed, as Dey put it, 'there is a difference between an open mind and an empty head' (Dey, 1993 in Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 47).

The main corpus of data on which this article is based is comprised of newspaper articles that discuss collaborative consumption and that were published in major news publications between May 2010 and April 2012. After filtering out similar articles (such as when a newspaper runs a story that had previously been published elsewhere), a search of LexisNexis' database of 'major world publications' for 'collaborative consumption' yielded 84 newspaper articles. Of these, 20 were excluded from the analysis on the grounds that they did not discuss collaborative consumption in any substantive manner (for instance, articles of less than 150 words; notices of a public event at which collaborative consumption would be discussed; announcements of the publication of a book about collaborative consumption; errata notices; and so on). The remaining 63 articles were imported into the qualitative content analysis software package, Atlas.ti, for coding.

A word about the choice of the corpus of texts is in order. As one would imagine, collaborative consumption is a subject widely discussed on the internet,[6] and so there would seem to be a strong case for analyzing natively online texts. However, there are a number of reasons for choosing to analyze newspaper articles instead. First, by searching for 'major

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[5] See http://www.shareable.net/users/rachel-botsman, accessed 6/5/2012.
[6] A Google search for "collaborative consumption" (with the quote marks) returns 320,000 results (as of May 2012).

world publications' in LexisNexis the body of texts is limited to newspapers of relatively high standing.[7] This kind of control is much harder to implement when studying online texts. Second, very often articles in high profile newspapers are re-written or paraphrased by bloggers or other online writers. While other people's readings and interpretations of articles published elsewhere can certainly be of interest, in this instance I prefer to read the source myself. Third, I feared that relying on online publications (blogs, articles from various websites) might result in an overemphasis on technology. If what concerns this study is the constructed relationship between collaborative consumption and the medium of the internet, then it could be problematic to take texts from purely online publications, as they may seek to overstate the place of the internet in the expansion of the phenomenon under study. A future study could empirically test this hypothesis.

It should also be noted that many of the excerpts cited below include quotations from various interviewees. While one might argue that quotes from interviewees are not quite the same as the journalists' opinion, it is nonetheless the case that the journalist picked those quotations to appear in their articles, and as such they are certainly part of the construction of collaborative consumption in newspapers.

FINDINGS

All but four of the 63 newspaper articles analyzed made some reference to technology, or to the technological aspects of collaborative consumption. Many of these also dealt explicitly with the question of the relationship between collaborative consumption and the contemporary technological environment, and specifically that of the internet, social networks, and Web 2.0. In this section I present these relationships as postulated by the journalists and commentators in their writings about collaborative consumption.

Analysis of the 63 newspaper articles shows a number of different understandings of how collaborative consumption and network technologies are associated. In the broadest terms, we can distinguish between those that see technology as *enabling* collaborative consumption, and those that see it as *driving* collaborative consumption. Within these categories, as we shall see, there may be differing and even contradictory interpretations of the place of technology in the emergence of collaborative consumption. I shall start by discussing the views of technology as an enabler, before presenting the understandings of collaborative consumption as somehow the consequence of our behavior in social network sites (SNSs),

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[7] The newspapers that provided the articles include *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Times* (from London), *The Australian Financial Review*, and others.

related through the use of the word 'sharing'. Finally, I present the terminology and metaphors used in talk about collaborative consumption as technological.

Technology as enabler

By viewing technology as an enabler, the newspaper articles tend to draw on one of two narratives: first, that technology is enabling processes that are being driven by financial and environmental concerns; and second, that technology is enabling processes that express behaviors that are described as age-old, tribal, or innately human.

The most neutral views of the role of technology in the growth of collaborative consumption merely note that social media and networks are being used by consumers. 'Consumers tend to be leveraging social media to create communities around collaborative consumption', writes Katie Cincotta (2011: 17), quoting Booklending.com founder, Catherine MacDonald, while Kevin Courtney (2011: 5) notes that, '[a]ll over the globe, people are using social networks and other webs platforms to trade, swap, rent or barter goods, skills, services or expertise'.

Other commentators, however, go beyond merely noting that collaborative consumption is often carried out by means of social media, giving it a more active role as an 'enabler'. For instance, in an article in The Times, journalist Alexandra Frean (2010: 46) tells us that '[t]he rise of collaborative consumption [...] has been made possible by the internet, social networks, mobile devices and location-based GPS services enabling the ready exchange of data concerning location, availability, price, access and so on', while a feature in The Guardian describes 'the internet and social networking' as 'lubricants for collaborative consumption' (Hickman, 2011: 10). Echoing the metaphor of lubrication, an article in the Sydney Morning Herald about car-sharing explains that

> Scheduling a fleet of a few hundred cars across several thousand drivers once required vast and complicated record keeping, greased with plenty of labour. That same capability, computerised, networked and delivered into every home and onto every mobile, drops the bar low enough that the previously impossible becomes realisable. The friction associated with this so-called 'collaborative consumption' has been removed (Pesce, 2012, p. 11)

Botsman herself said in an interview, also with the Australian Financial Review, that 'technology has "taken the friction out of the process"' (Macken, 2011: 22). In keeping with these mechanical metaphors of friction and lubrication, collaborative consumption is also described as 'being fueled by a slew of new startups' (Baedeker, 2011: 31). At this level, social media and network technologies, especially mobile technologies, are seen as constituting the

infrastructure for collaborative consumption, or as a necessary condition for the success of collaborative consumption.

However, as well as being a friction-reducing lubrication, technology has, according to some accounts, served as a catalyst to processes that had already got underway. For example, Mireya Navarro (2010: 22) writes that '[s]ocial media like Facebook lend momentum to [collaborative consumption] as people join forces to trade, share or negotiate better deals from retailers'. Or as put more forcefully by Leo Hickman (2011: 10), 'the arrival of internet-enabled social networking, coupled with 'geo-located' smart phones, has super-charged a concept that was already rapidly gaining primacy owing to the twin pressures of our environmental and economic crises'. Here, then, people are already consuming collaboratively for reasons that are nothing to do with the technological landscape and are everything to do with economics and the environment. Technology is not a necessary condition for these processes; rather, it is presented as super-charging them and enabling them to reach unprecedented heights.

There is a sense, then, that technologically-enabled collaborative consumption is somehow a return to a more natural way of living. As one article argues, '[r]eal-time technologies are starting to be used to create similar virtual community bulletin boards akin to the 'good old days' when everyone knew each other' (n/a, 2010: 30). Similarly, Jenna Wortham (2010: 1) describes collaborative consumption as 'a throwback to the good old days when people actually spent time socializing at local markets', while Deirdre Macken (2011: 22) acknowledges that 'sharing resources is an old-fashioned concept - think of toy libraries, bartering economies and traditions of sharing tools across back fences or tractors across country communities'. Sharing, according to these and other excerpts, is an old social practice that technology is enabling in new ways.

Some commentators, though, view sharing as inherent to the human condition, and subscribe to the idea that 'we've always done this. Charles Darwin and, latterly, Richard Dawkins argued that collaboration represented an evolutionary advantage, and humans seem to be natural collaborators' (Walmsley, 2011: 12). As Walmsley continues, through collaborative consumption 'we just re-adopted an old behaviour that, once again, became useful'. Sometimes, a mythical tribal past is invoked, for instance: 'All of this means across the rest of this century our shared future will look more like our ancient, tribal past than our recent history' (Pesce, 2012: 11). This is a point also made by Botsman and Rogers (2010: 68-9) in their book on collaborative consumption. Taking bottlenose dolphins as 'a role model for group cooperation', they argue that:

> For centuries we behaved like dolphins, coming together to get what we needed and sharing access to food, land and other resources. Going back millions of years to our Palaeolithic ancestors in the Stone Age, humans grouped into tribes or bands [...] the chances of getting food were greater if the tribe hunted and foraged cooperatively. Following a kill, the meat was cut into pieces and shared with everyone in the camp [...] Anthropologists believe[8] that this mutualism and reciprocity are hardwired human behaviours that serve as the basis for human cooperation and are the core of our existence.

In this sense, cutting-edge technologies are enabling a return to ancient and tribal behaviors. They are letting us live as we are truly meant to live, in conditions of 'mutualism and reciprocity', conditions that have been corrupted by the hyper-consumerism of modern society.[9]

One specific way in which social media are said to enable collaborative consumption is by enhancing trust. They do this in two main ways: by piggy-backing on SNSs, and by enabling the development of online reputation systems, sometimes by virtue of their piggy-backing on SNSs. For instance, in an article about Getaround, we read that 'participants use their Facebook log-ins, and owners can control who rents their cars' (Stross, 2012: 4). Elsewhere, we are told that social media are 'a convenient credibility check (many sites require renters to log in through Facebook, as a guard against false identities)' (Baedeker, 2011: 31). However, the online nature of collaborative consumption ventures is not necessarily dependent on SNSs: 'If someone wants to rent your iPad or crash on your couch, the person's online profile leaves a trail of digital bread crumbs that makes it harder to pull off a scam, giving potential lenders and hosts reason to breathe easier' (Wortham, 2010: 1).

In this section, we have seen how technologies are represented as enabling collaborative consumption in different ways: they are the media through which collaborative consumption takes place; they are accelerating processes that have already got underway; and they are allowing us to reinstate old behaviors ('old' as in how our grandparents used to live, and 'old' as in ancient and 'tribal'). In all of these instances, the motivations for engaging in collaborative consumption—the economy and the environment—lie beyond the technologies that are said to be enabling it. However, as we shall now see, many newspaper articles present a view whereby social media and ICTs not only enable collaborative consumption, but are actually drivers of it. It is to these representations that we now turn.

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[8] Botsman and Rogers (2010) cite no anthropologists who believe this.

[9] In the discourse of collaborative consumption, today's society is hyper-consumerist. The prefix "hyper" tells us no more about the consumerism of the society, but tell us a great deal about the views of those using it. "Hyper", in this instance, as in many others, simply means "very bad".

Technology as driver

The basic argument made by those journalists endorsing the view that communications technologies are driving collaborative consumption is that people are reproducing the pro-social behaviors that they are practicing online in offline situations, with the polysemic concept of 'sharing' serving as a key notion bridging online and offline activities, or, as put concisely by the headline of an article in The New York Times, we are 'Learning to Share, Thanks to the Web' (Goodman, 2010: 2). Put differently, the assertion is that '[s]ites such as Zopa, swaptree and Airbnb show that the web is changing the way people consume' (Walmsley, 2011: 12). In this section, I shall try to show how journalists substantiate this causal argument.

Before demonstrating the view of technology as a driver of collaborative consumption, I would first like to show how the two are sometimes represented as different but related expressions of another factor, namely, our increased desire to share. This rhetorical bridging can be seen in an interview given by consumer behavior analyst, Joanna Feeley, in which she says: 'From car-sharing and bicycle-rental schemes, to sharing stories, habits and tastes across social media, people are increasingly inclined to share' (Roberts, 2012). Despite having quite different logics, sharing stories in social media (updating statuses or tweeting) and sharing cars are both seen as expressing a growing inclination 'to share'. Similarly, Botsman was quoted in The New York Times arguing that '[f]armers' markets and Facebook have a lot in common. All around us we're seeing a renewed belief in the importance of community, in both the physical and virtual worlds' (Lipinski, 2010: 1).

In newspaper articles and features about collaborative consumption, technology, and especially SNSs, is represented as a driving force in a number of discrete ways. At the simplest level, collaborative consumption is, inter alia, 'a natural extension of social networking, which has created loose networks of people as well as, more importantly, trust in these networks' (Macken, 2011: 22). Also viewing collaborative consumption as an extension of social networking, Ben Bryant (2011) explains the growth of the former in terms of the success of the latter: 'Not content with persuading us to share our photos, location and innermost thoughts with the world, entrepreneurs are now asking us to post our possessions on the internet and hire them out to neighbours'. Here, the online and offline are bridged by 'entrepreneurs', regardless of the fact that the entrepreneurs who are 'asking us to post our possessions on the internet' are by no means the same entrepreneurs who have been developing and promoting SNSs.

A similar argument is more explicitly made by J. David Goodman (2010: 2) in The New York Times, where we are told that 'some scholars[10] say that the Internet—by fostering collaboration on a communal, open platform—has changed the way Americans think about sharing and ownership. Collaborative habits online are beginning to find expression in the real world'. This idea is also expressed by Katherine Boyle (2012), albeit with a dose of sarcasm. First, she quotes Craig Shapiro, founder of 'a venture capital fund that invests in companies that subscribe to the sharing ethos', who says, 'In only one generation, we've applied this idea of sharing offline, and it's become socially acceptable to share . . . the most personal of things', to which Boyle (2012: 1) comments, 'Which is why it doesn't seem weird to share ties and toys with strangers', before pointedly adding, 'You've already shared your sonogram with 4,317 of your closest Facebook friends' . Once again we see how the concept of sharing helps bridge online and offline activities: we share such intimate details online (the sonogram—an image from inside someone's body—stands here for the ultimate in the intimate and personal), that we have no problem sharing stuff with other people offline. The argument, we should note, is causal: online sharing gives rise to offline sharing. As Boyle (ibid) smartly puts it: 'We're changing the privacy settings of our real lives'.

This is similar to a point made in an interview by Botsman with The New York Times: 'People are looking to express their individualism but want to do it in a more social way', she says. 'They've experienced how to do that virtually on Twitter, Facebook and elsewhere. Now they're looking for that face-to-face interaction' (Hochman, 2011: 14). In other words, having learnt how to express our individualism socially and online, people now want to take those positive experiences into offline environments. In interview, Roo Rogers, Botsman's co-author (Botsman & Rogers, 2010), explains that '[s]ocial networks have reminded us of the importance of community. In the end collaborative consumption is a very sociable model' (Bryant, 2011). Because of their online experiences, the 'new consumers' of tomorrow, according to Deirdre Macken (2011: 22), have a mindset that makes them 'comfortable dealing in social networks'. This was a point made by Botsman in her talk to a Ted conference in Sydney, Australia, which was cited, in part, by Hannah Sung in the Canadian The Globe and Mail (2011). Intrigued by the partial quotation, I looked up the text of the original talk.[11] In it, Botsman says today's digital natives, or Generation Y, are 'growing up sharing—files, video games, knowledge; it's like second nature to them'. As a result, says Botsman, 'sharing behaviors—through sites such as Flickr and Twitter that are becoming second nature online—are being applied to offline areas of our everyday lives'.[12]

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[10] The author does not tell us which scholars. Moreover, the scholar whom he quotes in the following paragraph—Yochai Benkler—says he is unaware of any research that makes the point argued by the journalist here.

[11] Botsman's Ted lecture can be watched online at
http://www.ted.com/talks/rachel_botsman_the_case_for_collaborative_consumption.html, accessed 6/5/2012.

[12] This is slightly misquoted by Sung as "the sharing of behaviors…".

This is quite a remarkable claim, one that goes far beyond conceptualizing social media as nothing more than technologically enabling environmentally friendly and economically sound activities. The argument is that because people—and especially young people—are so used to sharing online, they have no problem sharing offline too. However, this is to deploy the word 'share' in two quite different ways at one and the same time. When we share on Flickr or Twitter, we are showing others our photos, or telling them what we are up to. This type of sharing is best conceived of as communication. However, when I share my power drill (the ever-present example of collaborative consumption), this is best conceived of as distribution (John, 2013-b). Given, for instance, that distributing my possessions comes at a potentially higher price than communicating my thoughts (and even if there is a price to communicating my thoughts, it is entirely different to that of distributing my possessions), these two practices would seem to have very little in common but the word 'sharing'.

Moreover, while this association between sharing on Twitter and sharing offline would appear to rely on the well-documented ability of online spaces to nurture communities that span on- and offline environments, it also makes the implicit claim that through our experience of community in online platforms (and one might question the extent to which all users of social media do indeed experience community through those media, or what kind of community they experience) we are prepared to embrace community in other aspects of our lives. Indeed, this yearning for community, particularly among city dwellers, is referred to often in the newspaper articles. For instance, one journalist posits that 'The services may be gaining popularity because they reinforce a sense of community' (Wortham, 2010: 1), and in a piece about British peer-to-peer car rental platform, Whipcar.com, we are told that 'you can maximise the usage of your vehicle and create trusting neighbourhood relationships between lender and lessee' (Botsman, 2011: 8). While it is not hard to see how many collaborative consumption initiatives might reinforce a sense of community, the argument that, having experienced community online people now wish to experience it offline, is not explicitly substantiated; it is speculation, with no real evidence behind it.

A final peculiarity in the causal linkage made by various commentators between use of online social media and participation in collaborative consumption ventures is that most of the latter involve interacting with an entirely different set of people from the former, notwithstanding platforms that require you to sign in with Facebook and reproduce your network from that site. If we think about peer-to-peer lending within a neighborhood, for example, the assumption is that you do not know the person with whom you are interacting—and many would say this is precisely the point—whereas the majority of the people with whom we interact online, or at least in SNSs such as Facebook, are people whom we do know,

albeit to varying degrees. In other words, if relations of trust develop between lender and lessee, they are subsequent to the sharing transaction, and do not precede it. If we are to accept that there is a causal relationship between use of social media and collaborative consumption, and if this relationship revolves around trust, then it would seem that we need to accept that (1) people learn to trust strangers online, and then (2) take that trust and place it in other strangers offline. Both of these propositions are quite hard to admit.

However, regardless of whether we accept the causal argument that the use of SNSs among Generation Y and others can help explain the growth in collaborative consumption, it is nonetheless an argument that appears in the press coverage of the collaborative consumption phenomenon, and is a major way in which technology is constructed as driving new forms of community- and trust-based consumption. As noted, one of the things that the use of SNSs and the new-old practices described above have in common is the word, 'sharing'. It may be that those who make the connection based on that word are merely bamboozled by it, and are guilty of some rhetorical trickery that ignores the quite different logics of sharing when it refers to communication and distribution. It may also be that they are sensitive to the fact that in all of its different senses, sharing refers to relations between people, and to the constantly shifting boundaries between the public and the private—'We're changing the privacy settings of our real lives'. This question, though, lies beyond the scope of the current paper.

Technological metaphors and terminology in the discursive construction of collaborative consumption

As well as explicit references to the relationship between technology, and especially communications technologies, and collaborative consumption (technology as enabler and technology as driver), the metaphors and other terminology employed by the newspaper articles analyzed for this paper point to the construction of collaborative consumption as a technological phenomenon in another, more subtle way. I wish to make two points in this regard. The first concerns the description of collaborative consumption ventures as 'start-ups' and the use of terminology from the world of high-tech, while the second is to do with the metaphor of P2P (peer-to-peer).

Start-ups and high-tech terminology

The various enterprises and companies that constitute the collaborative consumption scene are very frequently described as start-ups. For instance, one article declares that 'A new breed of consumers is renting, sharing, swopping and bartering, and a growing number of start-ups are popping up to meet their needs' (Chua, 2011). More specifically, the company, SnapGoods, is described as 'one of the latest start-ups that bases its business model around allowing people to share, exchange and rent goods in a local setting' (Wortham, 2010: 1), while car-sharing service RelayRides is described as 'a startup born in Boston and backed by Google Inc.'s venture arm and other investors' (Moore, 2011: C6).

This conceptualization of companies providing collaborative consumption services as start-ups may reflect the fact that they really do fall into the category of companies commonly defined as start-ups, if a start-up company is young, facing a high degree of risk, and offering an innovative product or service. A start-up, then, need not necessarily be a tech company, but in the popular usage of the term that is certainly what it connotes. Certainly the institutional context that has developed around these companies is a very start-up oriented one, with bodies offering seed money exactly as venture capitalists do.

My task here, however, is not to determine whether the companies and services described in the newspaper articles are 'really' start-ups or not. Rather, my argument is that their classification, or labeling (Hacking, 1986), as high-tech start-up companies most certainly contributes to the construction of collaborative consumption as a technological phenomenon. For readers learning about collaborative consumption for the first time, the description of companies as start-ups, and references to venture capital, create an association between collaborative consumption and the high-tech scene. For instance, an article in *The Times* about the American company RelayRides presents it as follows:

> His company has raised $5 million (£3.2 million) in funding from, among others, Guli Arshad, an entrepreneur and venture capitalist, Google Ventures and August Capital. It is part of a growing movement known as collaborative consumerism, where the emphasis is on the sharing of goods rather than ownership (Frean, 2010: 46).

If the terminology of start-ups and venture capital, along with references to technology firms such as Google, depict collaborative consumption as a technologically-based phenomenon, a similar consequence can also be seen in relation to the use of the metaphor of peer-to-peer.

Peer-to-peer

The term peer-to-peer, or P2P, refers to a specific type of network configuration, namely one in which the various members are connected to one another directly, or through other members, but not through a central hub. As defined by Michel Bauwens (2011: 42), it is 'any system which allows agents to freely and permissionlessly interact with each other'. This is not to say that certain nodes are not more densely connected than others, but it is to say that the network lacks a center, an organizing core. According to Bryn Loban (2004), '[t]he term Peer-to-Peer (P2P) appeared in the world media around the year 2001 with a music sharing system called Napster'.[13] However, he adds, 'P2P is, strictly speaking, nothing new, but is more of an evolution than a revolution', with Minar and Hedlund (2001: 4) asserting that the 'original internet was fundamentally designed as a peer-to-peer system'. The term peer-to-peer thus refers to computer networks, and to use it in relation to networks of people is to use it metaphorically. Moreover, the use of the peer-to-peer metaphor is significant because, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 39) teach us, metaphors 'structure not just our language but our thoughts, attitudes, and actions' as well.

The notion of peer-to-peer has a number of connotations that sit well with the overall agenda and outlook of collaborative consumption. First, there is a parallel between the notion of redundancy in a peer-to-peer computing network—the idea that if one node falls, others can take up the slack—and the key concept of idling capacity in collaborative consumption, defined by Botsman herself in an article for *The Observer*, as 'the untapped social and economic value of under-utilised spaces, skills, time, gardens, and 'stuff'' (Botsman, 2011: 8). However, while peer-to-peer computer networks seek to create redundancy, peer-to-peer lending aims at minimizing it. Second, both types of peer-to-peer system are decentralized. For peer-to-peer loan schemes in particular, this aspect of the metaphor is especially attractive given the context of the financial crisis and a mistrust of banking institutions. The peer-to-peer metaphor thus holds out the promise of unmediated contact between individuals, a promise that is all the more appealing when the traditional mediators are perceived as greedy and obstructive. Relatedly, the peer-to-peer metaphor implies an absence of hierarchy and a sense of egalitarianism, which resonate strongly with the concept of sharing.

The metaphor of a peer-to-peer network can thus be seen as one that furthers the goals of collaborative consumption. In addition, though, and together with the use of the term start-up as discussed above, the metaphor reinforces the embeddedness of collaborative consumption in technology. Put differently, it contributes to the construction of collaborative

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[13] Andrew Oram (2001) dates the growth in the term's popularity to mid-2000.

consumption as a movement rooted in cutting-edge technologies. The technological veneer helps to construct collaborative consumption as young and sexy, as a field of action populated by young and technologically astute go-getters who are receiving funding from venture capitalists for their start-ups, the aim of some of which is to construct peer-to-peer networks between people, who, it is assumed, not only are online, but who carry smartphones as well. Thus not only is collaborative consumption portrayed as being enabled or driven by contemporary technologies, and especially the smartphone and SNSs, but it is also talked about in terms of metaphors from the world of computing.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that collaborative consumption is a movement that is very tightly associated with technology. Analysis of 63 newspaper articles about collaborative consumption shows them to be replete with references to technology. I have shown how collaborative consumption is constructed as a technological phenomenon in three main ways: technology is said to act as an *enabler* and as a *driver*, while *terminology and metaphors* from the world of high-tech also permeate writing about collaborative consumption.

While this paper has sought to describe the affinity between collaborative consumption and technology, a question for future research might be whether the close connection between the two is actually the source of the former's success in recent years. That is, one might want to ask whether the construction of collaborative consumption as technological is responsible for its success. Compared to ethical consumerism, there is no doubt that collaborative consumption is currently enjoying great traction. For instance—and with all due caution in reducing influence to a few numbers—during the two year period in which the 63 newspaper articles on collaborative consumption analyzed in this paper were published, 58 were published on ethical consumerism or ethical consumption.[14] Also, while for each of the years 2002-2009, Google searches for 'collaborative consumption' and 'ethical consumerism' or 'ethical consumption' (taken together) yield roughly similar numbers of hits, since then the online presence of collaborative consumption has far outstripped that of the two latter terms put together. The association of collaborative consumption with new technologies constructs it as advanced, high-tech, new, and as appealing especially to young people (Generation Y, or Millennials), attributes that attract the attention of journalists and other writers, and which might explain the growing prominence of collaborative consumption.

Some of the responsibility for the construction of collaborative consumption as a high-tech movement can be attributed to Botsman and Rogers' book, *What's Mine is Yours*, which

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[14] The fact that this comparison was conducted using the same search tool (LexisNexis) gives it some validity.

unambiguously places technology center stage, and which is a key source for many of the articles (27 of the 63 newspaper articles mention Botsman by name). Indeed, Botsman and Rogers (2010: 67) explicitly talk to what they assume are their readers' perceptions of 'the old C's associated with sharing: cooperatives, collectives and communal structures', arguing that 'the words themselves are loaded with stigmas and unfortunate associations'. The concept of ethical consumption does not even get a look in in the book, nor is it mentioned in any of the newspaper articles about collaborative consumption.

As mentioned above, sharing is a key concept that bridges contemporary ICTs and collaborative consumption. Nowhere is this clearer than when our proclivity for sharing online (where sharing is a type of communication) is said to be causally responsible for our proclivity to share offline (where sharing is a type of distribution). In both online and offline environments, sharing refers to a type of interpersonal relationship based on equality, trust, mutuality, cooperation, selflessness (or at least a lack of outright selfishness), considerateness, and other similar values. Sharing also implies intimacy between people, as suggested by the type of emotional communication known as sharing (Carbaugh, 1988, see esp. Chapter 8) and the cultural belief that it's good to talk (Cameron, 2000; Illouz, 2008).

By mentioning sharing as a type of emotional communication it is my intention to point to a wider complex of sharing behaviors than those instantiated by collaborative consumption, and to place collaborative consumption, whose proponents call it part of a sharing economy, into a broader social context. This context is one in which the purported pro-social consequences of Web 2.0 and SNSs are uncritically hailed, in which openness, honesty and egalitarianism are seen as the foundation stones of interpersonal relationships, and in which trust and mutuality are said to be replacing over-competitiveness and hyper-individualism, the defining features of an economic system that is portrayed as having lost its legitimacy. In other words, it is a context in which sharing—either technologically mediated or face-to-face—is a central value, practice, and rhetoric.

Acknowledgments

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