Cartographies of Sharing:
Situating the Geoweb in the Sharing Economy in Canada

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to critically assess the discourse and emergent regulatory issues surrounding the sharing economy and to describe its emergence in Canada. The sharing economy is particularly relevant to the geoweb as it capitalizes on web 2.0 mapping interfaces, including its crowdsourcing of the processes of production, distribution, and consumption. Geospatial media, coupled with the larger social practices of production that typically accompany the geoweb, are in many respects necessary for the sharing economy's development, and as such can be a key application of the geoweb, and encompass a variety of markets. To date, scant academic or policy research has assessed the state of the sharing economy in Canada, but Canadian cities have already begun to experience regulatory pressures and challenges from emerging sharing economy platforms such as the ride sharing service Uber and the hospitality service Airbnb. The increase in services and the wildly hyped financialization of several sharing economy companies by Silicon Valley companies and venture capital firms call for a timely interrogation of the particular regulatory challenges, and political and economic processes of the sharing economy. This will in turn allow for a more thorough understanding of how the geoweb is changing existing power structures within municipalities, as well as creating new kinds of economic markets and opportunities.

Introduction

Juliet Schor (2014) has categorized sharing economy services into four broad areas. These include, one, the recirculation of goods, with its origins in the 1990s dot.com boom, which spawned popular services such as eBay and Craigslist, and then later similar services such as Kijjiji and the creative craft marketplace Etsy. The second is the increased utilization of durable assets, to include transportation services such as Zipcar, Uber, and the bike sharing service

Bixi; lodging services such as Couchsurfing and Airbnb; and tool libraries. The exchange of services that are monetized is the third category, characterized by Taskrabbit, an online marketplace allowing for the outsourcing of small jobs within local environs. The fourth category is the sharing of productive assets via cooperatives, peer production sites, shared workspaces, hackerspaces, and makerlabs. Many of the objectives and promotional material from sharing economy companies boast the advantages of peer-to-peer relationships, such as building social connections and creating community. The sharing economy is dependent on the reputational economy, wherein ratings and rankings from users create reputation capital (Botsman and Rogers, 2010, p. 219; Swallow, 2013) that can ensure the continued purchase of these services by others. In turn individual service economy labourers are potentially assured of the continued use and compensation of their services.

The promise of the sharing economy is that it offers the potential to empower citizens through innovative platforms that enable new modes of selling or renting individual assets and labour power in ways that promote a more disintermediated relationship between supply and demand. One of the core aspects of the sharing economy is to capitalize on, and redistribute, the "idling capacity" of many of the household goods and services that are under-utilized, such as tools, cars, rooms, and sometimes labour power. Social networks and GPS-based platforms are one mode for communicating, marketing, distributing and sharing or selling services within the sharing economy (Botsman and Rogers 2010, p. 83). For some, the potential for the sharing economy is one of eventually reaching "zero marginal cost" whereby the actual costs of production can be stripped to bare minimum; markets, in this particular interpretation, can reach a state of sustainable efficiency and performance, particularly as the processes of quality control and regulation can be outsourced to the individual (Rifkin 2014). The underlying belief is that this has the capacity to challenge the necessities of market regulation, whereby, for some, the sharing economy offers the potential to do away with the necessity of state regulatory bodies by transferring the responsibilities of regulation onto the consumer, typically through rating systems that are constitutive of a new reputation economy. In this understanding, market powers are more evenly dispersed throughout a network of suppliers and consumers; cartographic interfaces in particular become instrumental in creating a more even marketplace that can allow virtually anyone to become their own entrepreneur by selling their capacities for labour, or their under-utilized assets on the market. In this respect, the social, economic, and political changes afforded by the sharing economy exist alongside the technological innovations of the sharing economy, particularly its use of interactive geo-spatial mapping, crowdsourced geographic information production and mobile crowdsourcing (Thebault-Spieker, Terveen, and Hecht, 2015).

Canadian cities, while committed to fostering new forms of economic innovation, are increasingly experiencing challenges about whether and how to regulate the sharing economy. This is particularly evident as incumbent service providers such as taxi-cab companies exert pressure on municipalities over the legality of the services, such as Uber. Issues of regulation have been difficult to properly assess, but tend to fall under concerns over insurance, liability, and safety. However, the sharing economy has also challenged many assumptions about the overall nature and status of labour in digital economies, whereby a regulatory "gap" has allowed for individuals to operate as, for example, taxi drivers in the case of Uber, without first undergoing the necessary training or licensing by cities (CBC 2015). This is precisely why incumbent industries such as taxis, hotels, and maid services, have sought to attack the legal status of sharing economy labour; as they see it, these new business models have the capacity to fundamentally erode their market share (Sundarajan, 2014).

The purpose of this research is to critically evaluate the state of the sharing economy in Canada by highlighting the key regulatory gaps that currently structure the field of sharing economy platforms—particularly those that capitalize on the geoweb's potential for geo-spatial representations of new services in digital capitalism such as Uber and Airbnb. This research will also build upon existing sharing economy research (e.g. Schor 2014) by evaluating the ways in which the sharing economy is currently operating in Canada. This evaluation of the sharing economy differs from existing research in that it is grounded on a critical analysis of the political economy of the geoweb (Lesczynski 2014, Mosco 2009, Smith 2014), meaning that it attempts to critically situate the underlying processes of exploitation that structure the distribution and performance of the sharing economy.

The intended audience for this research will be primarily aimed at media and communication scholars. This is primarily because so far scant attention has been given to understanding the sharing economy by these disciplines, but also because in general the existing research on the sharing economy has been largely utopian predictions articulated by often-conservative policy think tanks with a vested interest in framing the sharing economy within a relatively narrow field of vision, typically at the expense of ignoring the larger social tensions and potentials for exploitation or abuse within sharing economy platforms (Harman, 2014; Morozov, 2014; Treuhaft, 2015). In turn, it is expected that this research can better inform policy directions by providing a more robust analysis of the potentials and realities of the sharing economy in Canada that is critical of the overly rhetorical discourses articulated by both proponents and cynics of the sharing economy.

Questions

This research hopes to address a series of open-ended questions in order to assess the state of the sharing economy in Canada. This research will rely primarily on secondary source material, particularly news media reports on the sharing economy, in order to properly identify the key issues that are informing or shaping policy discussions. This research will also explore policy papers written by academics and think tanks in order to explore how policy discussions are being shaped at multiple levels of Canadian society.

The sharing economy has the potential to profoundly influence city-citizen interactions, particularly by using geospatial maps to create new kinds of supply and demand distributions, and to reposition under-utilized assets and labour into new forms of economic production and exchange. At the same time, the opportunities of the sharing economy must also be further examined to consider the possibility of enacting new socio-economic divides and new forms of exploitation—particularly as many sharing economy platforms reduce employment status to temporary contract labour. This can in fact extend the precarious nature of work, allowing for new forms of uncertainty and risk for contract workers as they are forced to become self-reliant to mitigate risks. Numerous ambiguities around the legal status of sharing economy labour persist that require a balanced approach to framing the regulatory challenges of the sharing economy.

This research will ask three broad and inter-related research questions in order to situate the sharing economy in Canada:

1) What is the state of the sharing economy in Canada, particularly with respect to the fundamental opportunities and challenges currently facing municipal regulators in Canada?
2) What particular benefits and challenges has the sharing economy brought to Canadian economies, particularly key urban centres?
3) How is the geoweb contributing to the rise of the sharing economy in Canada?

A primary challenge to undertaking this research is the inevitable difficulties in producing reliable and generalizable knowledge of the sharing economy in virtue of the fact that the technological platforms and services, as well as the regulatory discourses, are constantly changing. This can be explained because of the relative nascency of the sharing economy in Canada, but also because popular sharing economy platforms such as Uber are constantly facing legal challenges by Canadian municipalities. Thus, predicting the future of the sharing economy is difficult.

Ideally, it may become necessary to target specific regulatory bodies or individuals and conduct a specific case study in order to produce a more thorough understanding of how regulators have sought to govern the sharing economy. However, for the time being, it is necessary to establish a more secure foundation of the sharing economy based on the analysis of key texts and discourses that are being circulated at the public level in order to understand the larger beliefs, discourses, perceptions, and debates facing the sharing economy in Canadian cities.

Conclusions

The sharing economy represents a clear example of a new form of social, civic, and private collaboration through geoweb tools and platforms. Its potential to offer new forms of market access and disintermediation present both significant opportunities but also challenges, particularly for municipal regulatory bodies that have struggled to keep up with technological change and entrepreneurial endeavours in major cities. Canadian cities have been no exception to this. The purpose of this paper is to critically assess the state of the sharing economy in Canada, with specific interest on understanding the regulatory approaches undertaken by major Canadian cities.

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