

The Rise Of The Sharing Economy

Claudia Cahalane | [Positivenews](#) | March 13 2014



Liftsharing: one example of the sharing economy in action Photo © Liftshare

Ready to look beyond consumerism? A new online movement is helping people to band together, share their resources, and get by with less

What if every street had only one of everything it needed: one ladder, one lawnmower, one toolbox? It might sound like the days of yesteryear, when neighbours were forced to share in order to overcome scarcity – but for a growing number of people, it's also a vision of the future.

In a resource-strapped and increasingly fragmented world, the theory goes, sharing and collaboration offer ways for people to both save money and stay connected.

That's the concept behind websites such as Streetbank, a virtual hub where users can advertise and exchange everything from a cup of sugar to their personal skills and expertise.

"We're starting to see people connecting through the site and forming real friendships. People swapping and sharing skills,

equipment and time,” says Tess Riley, who co-runs Streetbank. “We hear of someone borrowing a lawnmower and returning it with a whole load of apples from their garden, for example.”

The website, which launched in 2010, has seen its daily membership sign-ups increase sharply since the start of the year.

“We were getting a few dozen members a day, but we are now getting at least 300 daily and have nearly 35,000 members across the UK. It’s really snowballing,” Riley says.

And Streetbank is just one among hundreds of similar initiatives: part of a vibrant ‘sharing economy’, based primarily on the web, that now encourages people to share their stuff, time, food, skills, bikes, car journeys and more.

The potential for this more resource-efficient economy to edge its way into, and replace some aspects of, consumer society, is good news for those who believe there’s more to life than accumulating wealth and belongings.

This was all second nature to many of us before a culture of ownership took over,” says Benita Matofska, founder of Compare and Share, an online index of sharing services and websites. “And now we find ourselves with finite resources and a growing population, but we do still have unlimited potential to share,” she says.

Matofska, who organises an annual Global Sharing Day each June through her campaign group, The People Who Share, wants to make it easier for people to tap into that potential.

Her site lists more than 700 ventures that span the full breadth of the sharing economy, and also features a tool that lets people easily compare various sharing services. It will, for example, allow a user to enter a planned car journey and search a range of sites for potential carpool partners making the same trip.

The idea is to do the hard work for the member so that more and more people switch to sharing as a way of life, Matofska explains.

“Like eBay made it easy and cool to buy and sell secondhand things, with Compare and Share we want to open up the sharing market for people and businesses, to make it so easy to share that it really catches on and becomes aspirational,” Matofska says.

“We need a cultural shift so that wider society places a value on sharing, as was the case in ancient cultures, where people were revered for how much they shared,” she adds.

One of the sharing economy’s biggest success stories is Airbnb, a San Francisco-based company with a website that lets users rent out spare rooms and apartments worldwide, and helps tourists find cheap places to stay.

More than 10 million people have booked stays through Airbnb since its founding in 2008, with 6 million people using the site in 2013 alone. Along the way, some serious money has changed hands: in the UK alone, the company claims to have generated £502m in economic activity and supported 11,629 jobs over a 12-month period.

Though Airbnb’s pay-to-stay business model lacks the just-for-the-love-of-it ideological purity of barter-based services such as Streetbank, both approaches to sharing help spread resources and capital a bit more evenly through society, as well as helping members to forge deeper human connections with one another.

And users are finding ways to make Airbnb stays about more than just financial transactions. Even Heggernes, Airbnb’s UK and Ireland manager, spoke on the BBC’s business programme The Bottom Line in January about a member who asked every guest to spend one hour chatting to her child to broaden his horizons.

Another big selling-point for the socially conscious: using Airbnb puts cash in the pockets of everyday people, rather than further enriching big hotel chains. Last year, the company found that more than 60% of Airbnb hosts used rental money to pay bills with which they'd otherwise have struggled. Many others said their Airbnb income helped them to afford to stay in their current home.

That's part of a much bigger trend. Early last year, US business magazine Forbes estimated that the sharing economy would grow by more than 25% in 2013, funnelling \$3.5bn (£2.09bn) in revenues directly to consumers.

"Peer-to-peer sharing is moving from an income boost in a stagnant wage market into a disruptive economic force," the magazine declared.

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That's led many startups and social entrepreneurs to explore new business models. Sharers can now choose Couchsurfing for accommodation, Liftshare for car travel, Casserole Club for meal sharing with older neighbours, Rentez-Vous for designer clothes swapping, ParkShare for sharing parking spaces, or Storemates for storage space.

Existing businesses are catching on too. "Supermarkets are talking about sharing lorry capacity, [and] Marriott Hotels, through their partnership with LiquidSpace, rents unused spaces to entrepreneurs," notes Matofska.

Similarly, in 2012, B&Q launched Streetclub, a neighbourhood noticeboard service similar to Streetbank, while actor Joanna Lumley helped launch M&S's clothes 'schwopping' initiative.

"The businesses of the future are those who seize the opportunity of the sharing economy," Matofska believes.

Other corporate players are trying to buy their way into the sharing game, with a number of popular sharing services now owned by private companies. Notably, US car-hire giant Avis last year paid \$500m (£298m) to acquire car-sharing company Zipcar.

While it's good to see sharing being embraced more widely in its various shapes and forms, it's also important to keep the spirit of "sharing just for the love of it" alive, says sharing-economy pioneer Mark Boyle.

Boyle rose to prominence in 2009, after living entirely without money for more than two years, and surviving by bartering, swapping and sharing.

"It's great to see the sharing economy developing ... I was seen negatively by some in the early days as a bit hippyish," he says via Skype from Ireland, where he's setting up a new sharing-based community.

"But many people are feeling the pinch and lack of authentic community at the moment – and doing something for someone else who needs it, without expecting anything in return, is uplifting and inspiring," he says. "Everyone needs a bit of that right now."

The key, say Boyle and other experts, will be to make sure, as the sharing economy evolves, that wealth inequality does not become access inequality, and that everyone has the same opportunities.

"We've been indoctrinated into the idea that there must be something in exchange for helping someone, but the sharing economy isn't just about that," says Boyle.

The People Who Share is soon due to release a new report estimating that there are £3.5tn-worth of unused assets globally.

“Let’s harness these assets, using innovative solutions ... and let’s make sure this really does make society more equal,” says Boyle.

About The Author:

Claudia Cahalane : Claudia specialises in journalism on ethical and social issues. She is particularly interested in social enterprise, the new economy, equality and wellbeing.

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