The Age of Sharing
For Etty
The Age of Sharing

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Preface

Parts of this book have been published before, but none of those publications about sharing are reproduced here in toto. Parts of my article, ‘Sharing and Web 2.0: The Emergence of a Keyword’ (John, 2013a), appear in Chapter 3, and parts of ‘File sharing and the History of Computing: Or, Why File Sharing is Called “File Sharing”’ (John, 2014) appear in Chapter 6. Some of my first efforts at a theoretical analysis of sharing today (John, 2013b) appear throughout. The original research carried out for Chapters 2 and 4 and the second part of Chapter 6 has not been previously published.

Before their inclusion here, various ideas in this book had been presented at conferences, especially those of the Association of Internet Researchers and the International Communication Association.

This research was supported by The Israel Science Foundation (grant No. 38/14).
I arrived at the Department of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2010 to carry out postdoctoral research into globalization and multi-channel television, but was soon diverted by the observation that the word ‘sharing’ seemed to be all over the internet, and that this seemed vaguely interesting. I laid out some of my preliminary thoughts to Paul Frosh and Limor Shifman and they immediately started encouraging me to develop them and helped me to do so. Paul helped me with the process of finding a publisher, and Limor’s input to my first publication about sharing was invaluable. You would not be reading these words if not for their support, advice and intellectual contributions. A number of other people were remarkably supportive and helpful as this project got off the ground, nudging me in new and interesting directions, and listening to my efforts to formulate and formalize my thoughts: Menahem Blondheim, Elihu Katz, Tamar Leibes, Amit Pinchevski and Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt. For a year I shared an office with Benjamin Peters, which was both fun (obviously) and intellectually rewarding. Ben and I had many terrific conversations about sharing, and I’m grateful to him for them. While doing the research for this book, I was lucky enough to be appointed to the faculty of the Department of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I thank my colleagues for the fantastic intellectual
environment that they provide. Thanks also to Tzlil Sharon, my research assistant, for her dedicated assistance. For his unceasing encouragement and support, I particularly want to acknowledge the role played by Zohar Kampf as my sharing project took off and this book started to take form. His belief in my work was contagious, and I doubt whether the project would have got this far without it. I am extremely grateful to him.

Outside of my department, many other people have provided feedback, comments and suggestions. I would like to single out Russell Belk, whose intellectual generosity is inspirational. Russ’s influence is felt throughout the book, perhaps most strongly at those points where my views diverge from his. I would also like to acknowledge my erstwhile supervisor, Eva Illouz, who helped me to sharpen the contribution of the book as a whole before I started writing it, and provided the impetus to the questions discussed in Chapter 6. The time I spent at the Department of Media and Communications at the LSE was invaluable, and I thank Robin Mansell, Bart Cammaerts, Shani Orgad and Alison Powell for their thoughts and wisdom. Finally, I wish to thank Fred Turner, Jenny Kennedy, Michal Hamo and also the attendees at Benjamin Peters’ digital keywords retreat for their comments, input and discussions about the issues and work presented in this book.

I am indebted to the institutions that hosted me while I got this project under way as a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Communication at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and then at the Department of Communication at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and as a Visiting Scholar at the Department of Media and Communications at the LSE. I am further grateful for the funding I received to support my research, in particular the fellowship from the Lady Davis Fellowship Trust at the Hebrew University and the scholarship from the Kreitman School of Advanced Graduate Studies at Ben-Gurion University. I also deeply thank the Israel Science Foundation for its support.

The people at Polity have been a pleasure to work with. The peerless Andrea Drugan steered me through the proposal stage and set me on my way, while Lauren Mulholland and Elen Griffiths were there to guide me as the text was being
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Aram Sinnreich tutted and shook his head when I told him the title I originally had in mind for this book, gave the matter a few moments’ thought, and then pronounced: The Age of Sharing. Thank you, Aram.

This book would never have been written without the support of my family and friends. My parents, Rob and Judi, helped greatly at a crucial time, and my siblings, Zoë and Greg, cheered me on all the way. Mark Godfrey doesn’t know quite how inspirational he has been as I have plugged away at this. S. will be thanked elsewhere.

I’m not much fun to be around while writing, so my deepest and most heartfelt gratitude goes to the people who live with me. Maya and Yasmin, who will mostly be excited simply to see their names on this page, have been waiting for this book for a while. We’ve had some great chats together about what sharing means to them, and their occasional inquiries into when I’m finishing the book motivated me more than almost anything else. But at the centre of it all stands Etty – her sacrifices and willingness to take the strain, alongside her encouragement, belief and support, enabled me not only to produce this text but quite simply make everything possible (the travel, the weekends, the deadlines…). Etty, thank you.
In late 2015 an informal after-work event was held in Manhattan’s Lower East Side for high-tech entrepreneurs in the sharing economy. One of the panelists was discussing different models of sharing. Some are based on sharing for free, she said, while others involve sharing for money. I waited for someone to raise their hand and challenge the speaker, but no one seemed put out by the sentence they had just heard. I had come across the idea of ‘sharing for money’ before. When I first encountered it I wondered whether it was not a simple contradiction in terms, like ‘selling for free’. Or perhaps this was a classic example of ideology at work through language, where a word with positive associations is deployed in order to conceal the true exploitative order of things. But pointing to the misuse or even wilful abuse of the word ‘sharing’ is too easy and fails to contend with its shifting senses and multiple layers of meaning. The fact that someone could say ‘sharing for money’ and be understood by her audience, and the retort that the exchange of money negates the possibility of sharing, both require historical and cultural contextualization. The following pages are my efforts to do just that.

As a first step, we might observe how much sharing people seem to be doing these days. When we go online we share – photos, status updates, thoughts, memes, opinions, information. We are sharing offline too: witness the growth of the
sharing economy. Powered by apps, people are sharing their spare rooms, cars, power drills, free time, expertise, couches, workspaces, dinner leftovers and pets. We are also sharing when we talk about our emotions, which we do more often and in more situations than any previous generation. Some people are taught how to communicate this way from a very young age: American preschoolers, for instance, sit in ‘sharing circles’, where they talk about their unique experiences while their classmates listen, awaiting their turn to share.

At the same time, the use of the word ‘sharing’ to describe some of these activities is contested. For example, certain critics of the sharing economy say that ‘it isn’t really sharing, it’s renting/selling/trading’. Similarly, one might observe that Facebook does not share data with advertisers (though that is the language Facebook uses); rather, they sell it. Before engaging with these critical claims, though, I suggest that the very fact they are being made is indicative that something is at stake: the concept of sharing itself.

This is the age of sharing, then, because ‘sharing’ stands for both the cutting edge of our digital media-saturated capitalist society and economy, including the way we interact online, and a critical position vis-à-vis this society and economy. Sharing is both supportive and subversive of hegemonic (digital) culture: supportive in that the more you share updates and pictures on social media, for instance, the wealthier those platforms become, and subversive in that the more you share actual stuff with others, the less everyone needs to buy. Moreover, some say that sharing – be that of the distributive or communicative kind – leads to true and deep human connections.

In this book I will not be taking a stand on when the word ‘sharing’ is being used properly. In fact, my inquiries into sharing show that, as with many words, its ‘proper’ meanings and uses have changed quite drastically over time. For those who think that sharing is timeless, this discovery can be both surprising and perhaps a little destabilizing. In the following pages I show how the idea that sharing is the basis for authentic human relationships dates back no further than the 1930s, when city life, and especially advertising, were raising profound questions about authentic personhood. Moreover, the altruistic sense of sharing, or ‘sharing as caring’, only really
took root from the 1970s. By tracing changes in the meanings of ‘sharing’ – and especially the entrenchment in the mid-2000s of its sense as what we do online – this book shows that the prevailing uses of the term today, and the criticisms of these uses, have common roots in a sense of self moulded by capitalism. Thus, while remaining agnostic as to the ‘proper’ way to use the word ‘sharing’, I am nonetheless alert both to the role played by powerful social media companies in disseminating one of its newer meanings, and to the interest these companies have in being associated with the concept’s prosocial connotations.

Sharing is a very emotive concept: to start, it is deeply associated with childhood, and learning to ‘share nicely’ is one of the most basic skills preschoolers are expected to assimilate; second, and relatedly, sharing is always good – you cannot share non-nicely. Sharing, we are told, is caring, and, as such, has a warm glow around it. This warm glow also invites an ironic stance, as expressed in Figure 1.1: calling something sharing (in pretty colours to boot) can conceal its immorality; if we call it sharing, we might be able to get away with anything. This cartoon thus neatly captures
an introduction to the book, as key to this book: it is both a practice or set of practices with ethical dimensions, and at the same time a word with ethical connotations. This book aims to explore them both.

Three spheres of sharing form the focal points of this book: sharing as the constitutive activity of social media; sharing as a model for economic behaviour; and sharing as a category of speech. In this way, the book has something to say about our technologically mediated social lives; about our economic lives as producers and consumers; and about our emotional, interpersonal lives. At first glance, these spheres are quite distinct, and there would not seem to be a prima facie reason for bringing them together. Is it enough that the word ‘sharing’ is associated with each of them? I argue that it is, because ‘sharing’ is an important part of how these practices are constructed and conceptualized; it is a metaphor in terms of which different spheres of sharing construct one another and themselves. This is represented graphically in Figure 1.2.

When we talk about sharing we implicitly or explicitly engage with a set of values. Later on, I shall demonstrate and elaborate on the ways that each of the three spheres of sharing discussed here enacts certain values. For now, suffice it to say that when we talk about sharing we are talking about purportedly prosocial behaviours that promote, or are claimed to promote, greater openness, trust and understanding between people. Hence, Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook, can say that sharing (on Facebook) makes the world a more connected place; sharing economy evangelists promote sharing as a remedy for the ills of selfish and destructive hyper-capitalism (Botsman and Rogers, 2010); and Donal
Carbaugh defines the speech category of sharing as talk with a ‘relational embrace’ (Carbaugh, 1988).

It is the contention of this book that sharing, both as a broad category of social practices, and as the word used to describe a wide range of practices, is on the rise. Ours is the age of sharing.

What is Sharing?

There are many ways to answer this question. One is to inquire into the difference between sharing and other modes of resource management, such as buying (Belk, 2010) or lending (Larrimore, Li, Larrimore, Markowitz and Gorski, 2011). When answering the question this way we endeavour to isolate the characteristics of ‘sharing-ness’ in which acts of sharing partake. Then, equipped with these characteristics, we can decide whether or not to bestow the title of ‘sharing’ on different activities and argue with others over its aptness in different contexts. These arguments are played out in the field of file sharing, for instance, where we may hear comments such as ‘It’s not really sharing, it’s online theft’. By talking of ‘pseudo-sharing’, Russell Belk engages in a somewhat similar strategy (Belk, 2014). But this is not what I mean when I ask what sharing is, and the objective of this book is not to demarcate its boundaries such that certain acts by definition fall beyond what may be considered as sharing. This is not to say that such an approach cannot be nuanced, and I recognize the complexities posed by borderline cases, but with that approach there is an intellectual push for a definition or conceptualization that can be used to categorize different practices and, as I have already intimated, that is not the direction in which I am pushing.

By contrast, the non-prescriptive approach adopted here starts by asking what kinds of things are called ‘sharing’ in practice. Indeed, my own interest in sharing began after noticing, at some point in 2010, that the word ‘share’ was all over the internet. This observation sparked my sociological imagination, and led me in search of other practices that are called ‘sharing’. So if one way of understanding the question ‘What
is sharing?’ is to see it as asking what falls within a predefined
category and what does not, when I ask what sharing is I am
asking which social actions and phenomena we actually call
‘sharing’. This is the difference between asking ‘What prac-
tices should we call sharing?’, which is prescriptivist, and
‘What practices do we call sharing?’, which is what linguists
would call a pragmatic approach.

There are a number of good reasons for preferring the
latter to the former, and one reason for nonetheless keeping
the former in mind throughout. The first and main reason for
inquiring into the practices that we call ‘sharing’ (rather than
asking whether use of that term is justified or not in different
contexts) is that whatever else it is, ‘sharing’ is a metaphor,
and when dealing with metaphorical usage the question of
whether ‘x really is y’ is moot (the performer did not really
bring the roof down; my erudite friend is not really a walking
dictionary). The fact that diverse practices are termed ‘sharing’
should be taken as an opportunity to explore how various
spheres of life are constructed through the use of metaphors
from other spheres. One answer to the question ‘What
is sharing?’ might thus be: sharing is a metaphor we live by
(G. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

This is not to say that the literal, non-metaphorical meaning
of sharing should not interest us. It should, because it will
help us unpack the subsequent metaphorical uses as well as
leading to insights as to what might be implied by the notion
of sharing. The original meaning of ‘sharing’ is given by the
Oxford English Dictionary as dividing, or splitting. When
understood this way, the linguistic proximity between ‘shear-
ing’ and ‘sharing’ is suddenly obvious. Similarly, we thus
realize that a ‘ploughshare’ is so called not because it was
shared by all of the villagers, but because it shared, or rent
asunder, the earth.¹ This sense of division is central to the
early meaning of sharing, and also to our naive understanding
of the concept: sharing is when you let others have some of
what’s yours. Sharing is thus about division and distribution,
and as such raises questions about distributive justice. What,
we frequently ask, is a fair share? This is an important ques-
tion, because when sharing is about dividing and distributing
resources, it is a zero-sum game; there’s only so much to go
round. If sharing is conceptualized as an ethical practice, it
is because of its original relation to the distribution of material resources.

As mentioned, today there is a wide range of practices that are referred to as ‘sharing’, including posting updates on social network sites, or more generally the digital transfer of information; certain ways of exchanging goods and services; and talking about our emotions, or conveying information, usually verbally, of affective import. Given this, perhaps one could extrapolate a set of core values that inhere in the practices we call ‘sharing’. On the other hand, perhaps the polysemy of the word ‘sharing’ today is no more than homonymic: we use the same word but really it has quite different meanings in different contexts. One of the objectives of this book is to show that the different senses of sharing today are related. At the very least, when a practice is called ‘sharing’ a certain stance between the participants in that practice is posited; this stance might involve values such as openness, trust and maybe a sense of commonality.

However, because we are reflexive social actors, a second-order problem arises: we know which values are enacted when we talk about sharing (hence the cartoon in Figure 1.1), and so we may then want to describe certain practices as sharing in order to associate these values with those practices. Here, the word ‘sharing’ takes on a rhetorical force for the sake of which it is deployed or, indeed, avoided. For instance, Robin Chase, founder of Zipcar, explained how, during the company’s early days, she forbade use of the term ‘car-sharing’, believing it to have negative connotations (Levine, 2009). Today, though, the term appears prominently on Zipcar’s ‘About’ webpage (four times in the first four sentences, to be precise).2 As already noted, the rhetorical force of calling a practice ‘sharing’ has been observed by critics of file sharing, who disapprove both of the practice and the name given to it. Moreover, bearing in mind the positive values usually associated with ‘sharing’, there is something jarring about reading the privacy policies of the Facebooks and Googles of the mediascape and learning what information they do or do not ‘share’ with advertisers or law-enforcement authorities. At this point we would seem to be swinging back towards the view that there are certain practices that are ‘not really sharing’: social network sites (SNSs) do not share information
with advertisers, we might want to say, they sell it, and this distinction would seem to be absolutely crucial to any understanding of the political economy of the internet and social media. This example encourages us to inquire into the usage of the word ‘sharing’ in this specific context (see Chapter 3, and also the case of ‘file sharing’ in Chapter 6), which leads us to the quite morally neutral deployment of the term in the context of computing from its earliest days in the 1950s, when time sharing was the mechanism for enabling access to computers by as many users as possible.³

It is my contention, then, that through an analysis of ‘sharing’ we gain insights into contemporary culture, and especially contemporary digital culture. In this regard, ‘sharing’ might be considered a keyword for the digital age (John, 2016). In Raymond Williams’ canonical Keywords (1976), he showed special interest in ‘the explicit but as often implicit connections which people were making, in what seemed to me, again and again, particular formations of meaning – ways not only of discussing but at another level of seeing many of our central experiences’ (Williams, 1976: 15). This book examines these ‘implicit connections’ and pays particular attention to the word ‘sharing’ precisely because it pertains to ‘many of our central experiences’ today: our lives online; our lives as economic beings; and our lives as lived through our interpersonal relationships.⁴

Keywords tell us important things about the culture in which they operate. They do not encapsulate the entire culture – no one word or symbol could do that – but their analysis sheds light on enough aspects to make the effort worthwhile. When I call ‘sharing’ a keyword, and thereby make a claim as to the importance of paying attention to it, I mean that if we study ‘sharing’ and the social spheres in which it is a significant concept, we are able to learn something about how those spheres are related. But more than that, positing an age of sharing implies that this word, this metaphor, is itself fundamental to the ways those spheres are related.

So far I have pointed to the spheres of sharing that this book focuses on, and I have noted that the original, literal meaning of sharing is about the physical division of material resources. Before pressing on, I would like now to say more about the meanings of the word ‘sharing’; conceptions of
sharing as the fundamental state of both individual people and humanity as a whole; sharing as straddling the nebulous public/private divide; and, in closing this introduction, something about the chapters that lie ahead.

The Meanings of Sharing

Although the belief that a dictionary will provide us with the meaning of a word may be misguided (Williams, 1976), it is sometimes a good place to start nonetheless. Starting with the dictionary definition of ‘sharing’ has already taught us that it referred – and still does refer – to the division, or distribution, of resources. Sharing as distribution is, of course, governed by cultural norms. These norms are the subject of Katriel’s description of ritualized sharing and exchange among children (Katriel, 1987, 1988), as well as constituting one of the main focuses of the early anthropology of hunter-gatherer societies (see, for instance, Morgan, 1881; Stefansson, 1913). From these studies it is clear that sharing, whether it involves the distribution of either candies or prey, is constitutive of social relations. Indeed, Katriel, drawing on Mauss (1966 [1925]) and others, views the sharing of treats among children as ‘a ritualized gesture that functions to express and regulate social relationships with the peer group’ (Katriel, 1987: 307).

Another meaning of sharing is to have something in common with someone, where this thing may be concrete or abstract. For instance, when students share a dorm room, the room belongs to each person, and itself remains whole, despite being shared. This logic also applies to abstract shared objects which cannot be owned, such as interests, fate, beliefs or culture. Here too sharing is about distribution, but in an abstract and passive way, and in a way that is not a zero-sum game: the fact that a belief, for instance, is shared by two people does not preclude other people from coming to share that belief as well. Significantly, with this type of usage of ‘sharing’, there is no ‘sharer’. We share this planet on which we live, but no one is actively sharing something with others; rather, the sense of sharing in this context is closer to
‘partaking of’. Nonetheless, this sense of sharing still implies social bonds: people who share a fate are bound together by that fate; people who share a belief in a certain deity have that in common; and, some say, the people who share this planet are thus obliged to it and to one another.

In addition to being an act of distribution, sharing can also be an act of communication. This is the case when we talk about sharing our feelings or emotions. Unlike the two previous meanings of sharing, which the OED dates to the sixteenth century, this sense of sharing, as imparting one’s inner state to others, would appear to be somewhat newer, but it has quickly become a central social practice. Indeed, the first citation provided by the OED for the meaning of ‘sharing’ as ‘to impart to others one’s spiritual experiences’ only dates back to 1932 and is offered in the context of the Oxford Group, a Christian movement popular in the 1920s and 1930s (of which more in Chapters 2 and 5). In this regard, the OED quotes A. J. Russell, who wrote that the Oxford Group defined ‘sharing’ as meaning ‘Confession and Witness’ (Russell, 1932). To be sure, the Oxford Group attributed great importance to the practice of sharing: as described by Dick B. in his hefty volume on the spiritual roots of Alcoholics Anonymous (where, as with all support groups, sharing is the constitutive activity), ‘Almost every Oxford Group book abounds with discussion of “Sharing” by confession. The emphasis was on sharing with God and with another’ (B., 1997: 326). From here, it is but a short step to the notion of sharing one’s feelings that is central to the formation and maintenance of intimate relations in contemporary western society.

Sharing and the Human Condition

The last few years have seen a glut of books in praise of humankind and its tendency for sharing, cooperation and generosity. At the same time, a psychological literature has emerged that looks at propensities to kindness and sharing at the individual level. My objective here is not to evaluate the scientific validity of this work, but rather to point to the