The Age of Sharing

Nicholas A. John

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First published in 2017 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-6250-3
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-6251-0(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: John, Nicholas A., author.
Title: The age of sharing / Nicholas A. John.
Description: Malden, MA : Polity, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016015484 (print) | LCCN 2016033678 (ebook) | ISBN 9780745662503 (hardback) | ISBN 9780745662510 (paperback) | ISBN 9781509512287 (Mobi) | ISBN 9781509512294 (Epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Sharing. | Sharing–Social aspects. | Mass media–Social aspects. | BISAC: LANGUAGE ARTS & DISCIPLINES / Communication Studies.
Classification: LCC BF575.S48 .J64 2016 (print) | LCC BF575.S48 (ebook) | DDC 302/.1–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016015484

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Sabon
by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon

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Sharing and the Internet

Manuel Castells has posited that, '*In our society, the protocols of communication are not based on the sharing of culture but on the culture of sharing*' (Castells, 2009: 126; emphasis in original). Similarly, Sherry Turkle has said, in critical mode, that the 'best way to describe' the 'new regime' brought about by contemporary communication technologies, and especially smartphones, was 'I share therefore I am.'[1] These are but two examples of the way in which the notion of 'sharing' is deployed quite naturally nowadays in the context of digital communication.

For some, the idea that what we do online is sharing is not new. For instance, in a 2006 blog post introducing the 'Share on Facebook' bookmarklet, Chris Hughes, Facebook's 'manager for Share', wrote: 'Ever since this whole Internet thing got started, people have been sharing stuff left and right.'[2] Similarly, though writing from an entirely different political position, self-described 'venture communist' Dmytri Kleiner has stated that 'The internet has always been about sharing between users' (Kleiner, 2011: 179).

According to popular wisdom and rhetorical convention, then, the internet is and has always been about sharing.[3] However, inspection of some of the literature about the emergence of the internet, and an examination of the way that SNSs presented themselves during the years of their emergence and consolidation (approximately 2000–10),

raise three important observations. First, the cultural and discursive association between the internet and the values of sharing is not a natural given. Tarleton Gillespie's observations concerning the term 'platform' are equally apt here: 'A term like "platform" does not drop from the sky, or emerge in some organic, unfettered way from public discussion' (Gillespie, 2010: 359). This, of course, raises the question of where it does come from. Second, nor is the internet-sharing linkage a direct consequence of the architecture of the internet; instead, as Thomas Streeter argues, what matters is what 'we have brought to the internet rather than what the internet has brought to us' (Streeter, 2011: 187). Third, people have *not* been 'sharing stuff left and right' ever since 'this whole internet thing got started'. They may have been posting stuff, uploading stuff and sending stuff, but those actions were not called 'sharing'. Later in the chapter, I shall show when they became 'sharing'. As I have already said, if we live by our metaphors, then this is significant and deserves attention.

This chapter gets under way with the acknowledgement that, since its inception, the internet has been culturally and discursively associated with collaboration, cooperation, connectivity and community.[4] This is reflected in a strong utopian tradition of writing about the internet, which includes authors such as Howard Rheingold (1993), Clay Shirky (2008), Charles Leadbeater (2008) and *Wikinomics* authors Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams (2006). It also includes such varied texts as Yochai Benkler's *The Wealth of Networks* (2006), Nicholas Negroponte's *Being Digital* (1995) and Bill Gates' *The Road Ahead* (Gates, Myhrvold and Rinearson, 1995). The reader will doubtless be able to think of plenty more examples. I then move on to the observation that even if the internet has always been associated with prosociality, this prosociality has not always been subsumed under the concept of sharing – except in one important instance, namely, hacking culture. In order to demonstrate this I shall spend some time talking about people not talking about sharing – a tactic to which I return in my discussion of file sharing in Chapter 6. I then pay close attention to the emergence of sharing as the keyword for social media and what was, for a while, called Web 2.0.[5] At this point – as the new metaphor is taking

root – we can see people engaging with it, testing it, playing with it. We can also see people extrapolating it backwards and applying it to a time when people did not actually talk about the internet in terms of sharing. Taken together, these issues lead us once again to ask about the special power of 'sharing' as the main internet metaphor today.

Constructing the Internet as Prosocial

The meanings of new technologies are not presented to us ready for consumption; they do not come bundled with the technology itself. Instead, meanings are attributed to technologies by specific groups that occupy specific social positions. Science and technology studies (STS) researchers call this 'interpretive flexibility' (Pinch and Bijker, 1987). Examples are manifold: in a widely cited article, Kline and Pinch (1996) mention Susan Douglas on the radio (1987), Claude Fischer (1992) and Michele Martin on the telephone (1991), and David Nye on electricity (1990). Even histories of the internet written very close to its explosion into the public consciousness emphasized quite different aspects, as elegantly detailed by historian Roy Rosenzweig (1998), who compares a number of very divergent accounts of the creation of the internet (such as the Haubens' *Netizens* (1997) and Paul Edwards' *The Closed World* (1996)).

While not the only book to illustrate the assignation of meaning to the emergent internet,[6] Fred Turner's *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (2006) demonstrates a clear instance of this process. Specifically, he sets himself the task of explaining how 'the cultural meaning of information technology [shifted] so drastically' from the 1960s, when computers were seen as an oppressive tool in the hands of an oppressive society, to the 1990s, when they were an integral part of a 'countercultural dream' spearheaded by a disparate group that Turner calls 'the New Communalists' (p. 2). 'How was it', he asks, 'that computers and computer networks became linked to visions of peer-to-peer adhocracy, a leveled marketplace, and a more authentic self?' (p. 3). Note that these visions approximate present-day conceptualizations of

sharing. Note also that Turner does *not* ask how computer networks became linked to visions of sharing.

Significantly for the later adoption of the concept of sharing, and as will be shown in Chapter 5 on the therapeutic discourse, the counterculture described so lucidly by Turner was based on a type of interpersonal relationship with others as well as representing a state of self. For instance, the features of the internet that Turner seeks to explain include its purported ability to 'render the individual psychologically whole, or drive the establishment of intimate [...] communities' (p. 3). This is seen especially clearly in Turner's treatment of the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, or the WELL, an online forum which was the first to be described as a 'virtual community' (Turner, 2006: Chapter 5). The WELL was set up as a non-hierarchical, self-governing system and was populated, among others, by former dwellers of the communes of the 1960s and 1970s. Howard Rheingold was an early and influential member, and his classic text, *The Virtual Community* (Rheingold, 1993), was based on his experiences there. For him, computer networks offered the ability to 'rediscover the power of cooperation' and to 'recapture the sense of cooperative spirit that so many people seemed to lose when we gained all this technology' (Rheingold, 1993: 109). This is a postlapsarian take on community (which we shall encounter again when we discuss the sharing economy in the next chapter) and has a familiar structure: at some unspecified time in the past, we used to know what the power of cooperation was, and we used to have a cooperative spirit, but 'all this technology' robbed us of that knowledge – 'While we've been gaining new technologies, we've been losing our sense of community', states Rheingold (p. 109); now, though (he said in 1993), people are learning to 'use computers to cooperate in new ways' (p. 109).

The force of Turner's work is in helping to understand how someone like Rheingold came to his views regarding the place of computer networks in human sociality. As such, their texts are quite differently related to the activities on the ground: Rheingold's is a first-hand account; Turner's is an effort to contextualize Rheingold's account (and many others like it). By doing so, Turner makes an important contribution to our understanding of the cultural processes behind one of the

major imaginaries of the internet today (see also Mansell, 2012), an imaginary that enables us to understand what is meant when people talk about the internet as having a culture of sharing.

However, something that both Turner and Rheingold have in common is talk that strongly resonates with the values of sharing but that actually makes very little use of the term 'sharing'. The metaphor was not as readily available to them then as it is to us now. In other words, the internet was framed (by Rheingold and his peers) as a technology for collaboration and cooperation, which lent itself very readily to the metaphor of sharing. However, talk of the internet as a platform for 'sharing' is not present in Rheingold's account of the WELL, nor in Turner's account of the internet's associations with the American counterculture. As I shall show below, 'sharing' became the keyword for the internet in the mid-2000s, concurrently with, and probably as a result of, the widespread adoption of the term by the hugely expanding SNS scene. Even so, in the 2000 edition of *The Virtual Community*, though not in the original 1993 version, Rheingold paraphrases an article by Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia (1999) as arguing that 'cyberspace is a place where sharing is encouraged' (Rheingold, 2000: 364). Interestingly, though, Wellman and Gulia actually make no mention of sharing at all in that paper.[7] We might see this as a small moment in the process of the internet becoming a place of sharing. A similar moment can be seen in Turner's discussion of the WELL, which he describes as having 'an emphasis on sharing, intimacy, and leveled social hierarchies' (p. 248), while in Rheingold's account of the WELL there is actually precious little talk of sharing at all.

Moving from the internet in general to social network sites in particular, I offer one final example of the emergence of 'sharing': in their canonic article, boyd and Ellison (2007) define and analyse SNSs with very few mentions of sharing (there are some references to media, information, video and picture sharing – what I shall define below as sharing with concrete objects). However, fast-forward to their 2013 contribution to the *Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies*, which in many ways is an update to their 2007 article, and now there is a great deal of talk of sharing: people 'create content

to share with their contacts' (Ellison and boyd, 2013: 154); we are told that the 'primary driver of SNS use' is 'The desire to communicate and share content' (p. 159); we also learn that SNSs have lowered 'the barriers to communication and sharing' (p. 159). The clearest example of the point I am trying to make, though, is when Ellison and boyd are laying out their 'Definition 2.0' of social network sites. 'Social network sites have evolved,' they say, 'but their foundational activities – sharing content with a bounded group of users – are fundamentally the same' (p. 159). In the 2007 paper, though, not only does the term 'sharing content' not appear, but the emphasis is far more on profiles than on sharing (as Ellison and boyd themselves acknowledge in 2013). To be clear, my purpose here is not to quibble with boyd and Ellison's crucial contributions; rather, it is to use these two important texts to show that we have not always talked about SNSs in terms of sharing and, moreover, that there is a tendency to retroactively affix the term 'sharing' to practices that were not necessarily called that at the time.

This is not to say that talk of 'sharing' was not associated with early computing use: as I shall show in Chapter 6 on file sharing, the early computer systems worked on technologies that were called 'time sharing', and subsequently 'disk sharing'. This use of 'sharing', though, was quite literal: the mainframe's time was being divided up between the machine's users; the disk was being shared by users in the same way that housemates might have a shared dishwasher. In other words, the terms 'time sharing' and 'disk sharing' had no normative connotations. In relation to hackers, however, things are different. Here, the concept of 'sharing' would appear to have been central right from the start.

Sharing and the Hacker Ethic

In Steve Levy's classic account of hackers (Levy, 1984), right from the start he defines the 'hacker ethic' as 'a philosophy of sharing, openness, decentralization, and getting your hands on machines at any cost to improve the machines and to improve the world' (p. ix). The value of sharing seems to have

been part of the community's self-conception as well: in the very initial discussions around the formation of the legendary Homebrew Computer Club in March 1975 (the site of the first notorious case of software piracy), the words that came up most were 'cooperation' and 'sharing', reports Levy (p. 202), and the group would develop a 'time-honored practice of sharing all techniques, of refusing to recognize secrets, and of keeping information going in an unencumbered flow' (p. 276). Leader of the club, Fred Moore, placed sharing central to the experience of being a hacker: 'By sharing our experience and exchanging tips we advance the state-of-the-art', he wrote in a newsletter (p. 214). As another early Homebrew member told Levy later on: 'More than any other individual, Fred Moore knew what sharing was all about [...] That was one of the expressions he was always using – sharing, sharing, sharing' (p. 214).

There is other textual evidence that points to the centrality of sharing to hackers and the hacker ethic. In *The New Hacker's Dictionary* (Raymond, 1996), for instance, the 'hacker ethic' is defined as: 'The belief that information-sharing is a powerful positive good, and that it is an ethical duty of hackers to share their expertise by writing free software and facilitating access to information and to computer resources wherever possible' (p. 234). This definition itself contains at least two senses of sharing: sharing information implies telling others about information you have, while sharing expertise means freely distributing the fruits of your hacking labour and helping others to access resources. Sharing is also central to the hacker ethic as described by Pikka Himanen (2001), who adds to Raymond's definition that hacking 'should be motivated primarily not by money but rather by a desire to create something that one's peer community would find valuable' (p. x). Referring to the hacker ethic as a work ethic in the same sense that Weber described the Protestant work ethic opens a pathway to what is now commonly known as the sharing economy – this is a path pursued later in this book.

The two other contributors to Levy's book also write about sharing. Linus Torvalds (creator of Linux) wrote that 'The reason that Linux hackers do something is that they find it to be very interesting, and they like to share this interesting thing

with others' (p. xvii). And in the book's epilogue, Manuel Castells discusses the emergence of a 'new culture' characterized by the 'augmentation of innovation potential by cooperation and sharing' (p. 177), using the term here in a general sense that stands in contradistinction to capitalism.

In the field of hacking, then, sharing is and has been a central concept, where it is used to stand for anti-capitalist thought and practice: hackers share the products of their labour, they do not sell them; they share their expertise rather than charge an hourly rate for it; they share their knowledge and interests for the sake of forging community and making the world a better place. This is different from more general appraisals of the internet as a whole, in which the internet was talked about in terms of the values of sharing but without the word itself. I account for this in terms of the *digital* nature of hacking, as suggested above. The original hackers, who were deeply embedded in the computer scene, were already familiar with time sharing, disk sharing and file sharing, terms which, as noted, had little or no normative connotations. It would not have taken much linguistic imagination, though, to add the positive valence of sharing from other contexts to the idea of information sharing. We shall look at this more closely in the discussion of file sharing in Chapter 6.

If Not Sharing, Then What?

If the metaphor of sharing was not employed by commentators – both academic and lay – of the internet, how *was* its prosociality conceptualized? Before we were 'sharing' online, what was the label given to what we were doing?

One answer to this question is 'gifting'. For a while, acts of online prosociality, generosity and otherwise unpaid-for activities (such as creating a homepage, writing a blog or opening your music library to other Napster users) were analysed in terms of gifting, with Marcel Mauss's seminal work (1966 [1925]) providing inspiration for a tranche of articles that tried to understand why people would do stuff online for free.[8] This can be seen in Turner's book (2006: esp. p. 157), in which he adopts Rheingold's conceptualization

of the WELL as 'a kind of gift economy' (Rheingold, 2000: 49). This understanding has been evidenced in a number of articles in the online journal *First Monday*, with Richard Barbrook's influential article on 'The Hi-tech Gift Economy' (Barbrook, 1998) the stand-out piece (but see also Bays and Mowbray, 1999; Ghosh, 2005; Stalder, 1999; Veale, 2003). Another notable example is Markus Giesler's (2006) analysis of Napster as a 'consumer gift system'. In this article in particular what is somewhat surprising, and yet easily understandable, is the insistence on the conceptualization of gifting when the concept of sharing would seem to be just waiting to be picked up. This is not a criticism of Giesler's scholarship – my point is merely to highlight the relative novelty of sharing – but let us notice how Giesler talks about sharing: for instance, he quotes an interviewee who explains that 'everything that is shared is just accessible by everyone else' (Giesler, 2006: 286); and later on he explicitly talks about the 'social discourses, practices, and structures of sharing' (p. 287) even as he furthers his analysis of file sharing as a gift economy. Because my interest here is in the rise of a metaphor, I shall not engage with the question of whether Napster was an instance of a gift or a sharing economy, and in any case I shall discuss sharing economies and file sharing at length in subsequent chapters. What I have suggested here is that before the internet became all about sharing, its prosociality was conceptualized in terms of gifting and the gift economy.

Today, of course, discussions about the internet are suffused with 'sharing' talk, which brings it within the larger metaphorical structure of sharing that this book seeks to unpack. This explicit association between the internet and sharing is obviously in need of an explanation. My argument is that it is to do with the rise of SNSs and the central place the rhetoric of sharing has in them. It is to the rise of sharing in social media that we therefore turn.

Sharing and Social Media

Sharing is the constitutive activity of social media.[9] It is the umbrella name given to the myriad activities we carry out

online: updating statuses; uploading photos and videos; writing reviews on books and other products on Amazon and elsewhere; tweeting; checking in; and in fact almost anything we do. But why 'sharing'? What is the rhetorical force of the word in this context? How is it used? Have its uses changed over time? What is the political economy of 'sharing'? And does the word itself serve any ideological purposes?

In this section I focus on the evolution of the word 'share' in the context of SNSs with the objective of historicizing it and charting its emergence as the descriptor for our online participatory activities. This is an important task given the centrality of SNSs in our lives today, which in turn is conveyed in reflections on the word 'share' in popular media outlets and, as we shall see later on, in its appearance in the phenomenon of the 'sharing economy'. If one of the objectives of this book is to unravel the movement of the metaphor of sharing through different spheres, we should clearly take some time to unpack its meanings in the context of social media.

The richness of the word in this regard has not escaped the attention of columnists and critics. English satirist Charlie Brooker, for instance, responded to the launch of 'frictionless sharing' between Spotify and Facebook by describing sharing as 'a basic social concept that has somehow got all out of whack'.[10] 'The idea behind sharing is simple', he writes. 'Let's say I'm a caveman. I hunt and slaughter a bison, but I can't eat it all myself, so I share the carcass with others, many of whom really appreciate it.' Here Brooker draws on the trope of the hunter-gatherer sharing his prey – a theme explored in more detail in Chapter 4 – where the logic of this kind of sharing is a distributive one. 'But it's not all bison meat', Brooker goes on. 'The other thing I share is information.' Here, sharing has a communicative logic. According to Brooker's satirical take on current-day sharing, sharing among cavemen was functional: 'It kept the community fed, as well as entertained and informed.' These observations then serve as the springboard for a critique of today's economic inequalities (the rich do not share) and trends towards greater sharing: 'Not sharing money or bison meat, but personal information.' As I shall argue shortly, the ease with which Brooker can shift between different meanings of sharing

reflects a feature of the word that has made it extremely useful for SNSs, namely, its diversity of uses and logics or, put differently, its polysemic homonymity. Brooker also puts on display some of the associations readily made with 'sharing': cavemen/hunter-gatherer societies; the greed of bankers as the opposite of sharing (also referenced in the opening vignette of Benkler's *Sharing Nicely* (Benkler, 2004)); and telling people what you are thinking and doing. Notably, it is these associations that form the basis of Brooker's critique, according to which Spotify updating Facebook as to what its users are listening to should not properly be considered sharing; at the very best, it is a sign that the concept has 'got all out of whack'.

My approach here is somewhat more agnostic than that of Charlie Brooker and others who contrast SNS-based sharing with other, more 'real' types of sharing. Nonetheless, the associations made by Brooker (and many, many others) are important, as they point to the kinds of associations people make when thinking about 'sharing', including, one can assume, the people who write tag lines for SNSs. Before describing the evolution of 'sharing' (the word) in SNSs, we should note that even if people want to reproach SNSs for promoting an activity that is not 'really' sharing and wish to call foul on the appropriation of the word, it is not as if the implications of online 'sharing' are so very far away from what might be perceived as the 'truer' or more 'authentic' senses of sharing: in all cases, the act of sharing involves crossing the boundary between the private and public; it involves making accessible to a wider public material (photos, candies) that had previously been accessible only to me; and it (often) involves communicating an inner state, or status, to others. With that said, let us turn to SNSs and the brief history of the word 'sharing' in that particular context.

The website most closely identified with 'sharing' is, of course, Facebook. Indeed, Facebook itself declares that 'The power to share is the cornerstone of Facebook'.[11] Hence, it is not by chance that José van Dijck (2013) devotes an entire chapter of her book on connectivity to 'Facebook and the Imperative of Sharing'. In that chapter, van Dijck refers to two types of sharing: sharing as connectedness, and sharing

as connectivity. Sharing as connectedness refers to the ways that interfaces get us to share information with others (posting statuses, uploading photos, etc.), while sharing as connectivity refers to the interactions between Facebook and third parties (through the Like button, the erstwhile Beacon service and so on). As van Dijck observes, Facebook seeks to promote the former while concealing the latter. As we shall see later on, the fact that the latter (sharing as connectivity) is also called 'sharing' (by internet companies, at the very least) has given rise to criticisms regarding the proper use of the term.

While the centrality of Facebook in what van Dijck calls the social media ecosystem can hardly be questioned, I would add that the word 'share' has a history on Facebook – as it does throughout SNSs. In fact, Facebook was not even a pioneer in its use of the word, which does not appear in any of the site's self-descriptions until 2006, by which time it was already fairly common currency on other SNSs.

Early screenshots of the Facebook homepage (when it was still thefacebook.com), for instance, enable us to re-create something of the site's self-presentation. Indeed, what screenshots from 2004 and 2005 show is an absence of 'sharing' on Facebook; instead, the site quite unimaginatively presents itself as an 'online directory' where users are told they can 'Look up people at your school', 'See how people know each other' and 'Find people in your classes and groups'. At this early stage, then, the site is for making contact with other people, but not for 'sharing' with them.

Based on a reading of Facebook's own blog posts, the term 'sharing' gained widespread use within the company during the second half of 2006, which is also the time that Facebook opened itself up to all internet users (and not only university or high school students), perhaps suggesting a relationship between the conquest by SNSs of the social and cultural mainstream and the ascension of 'sharing' as their constitutive activity. The first mention of sharing in the context of Facebook came in May 2006 in a press release to announce the site's expansion to include work networks.[12] In that press release, Facebook was described as 'the social directory that enables people to share information'. But even though the company had started to represent itself in terms of sharing, the word had not yet become part of Facebook's lexicon. This is

evidenced by a blog post published under Zuckerberg's name on 30 August 2006, devoted to the changes that the site was going through (especially regarding photos, events, groups and the wall). In that post he does not mention sharing at all.[13]

The comprehensive adoption of 'sharing' by the site would appear to have been decided upon subsequently to that blog post, but before the end of October of that year, when Facebook published a blog post with the title 'Sharing is Daring'.[14] In that post, the internet is described as having always been a platform for sharing – 'Ever since this whole Internet thing got started, people have been sharing stuff left and right' – before Chris Hughes, Facebook's 'manager for Share', goes on to explain how easy it is now to share through Facebook by using the new 'Share on Facebook' bookmarklet – a button to add to one's browser that enables users to publish web content on their wall. Five days later, on 31 October 2006, Facebook announced that websites would be able to place 'links to share on Facebook'.[15] In the press release, Zuckerberg said: 'People share interesting content on the Web and on Facebook all the time. Now we're making the sharing process more efficient by giving people a simple structure to do it in.'[16] Even so, the use of the term 'sharing' was uneven across the Facebook site and was not included in the firm's tag line until 2008 ('Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life'[17]). Today, Facebook's mission is 'to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected'.[18]

This is clearly marketing talk: Facebook makes money through a model of advertising based on extremely granular knowledge about its users such that the more we share, the better for Facebook. In any case, I will have more to say about the function of the word 'share' in the context of Facebook later on. For now, let us note that the word was not always integral to the Facebook experience – as that experience is marketed by Facebook, at least – and that it emerged at some point in the second half of 2006. While Facebook is currently by far the dominant player in the online social network space, it is not the only one, and it was certainly not the first. In what follows, I explore the rise and rise of 'sharing' in SNSs throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, pointing to its increased adoption by SNSs as well as to new ways in which

the word has been used. This exploration will also enable us to start pointing to one of the contradictions of the word 'sharing' in the context of social media.

What follows is based on analyses of the forty-four largest, most visited and historically significant SNSs.[19] The list of sites was compiled from three sources: the ratings of Alexa, a leading company for web metrics, for visits to websites in its social network category for July 2011; data compiled in Wikipedia on the size of the membership of the largest SNSs;[20] and the section on the history of SNSs in boyd and Ellison's survey of the field (2007; see especially Figure 1 on p. 212). Data were collected using the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. The Wayback Machine 'is a service that allows people to visit archived versions of Web sites'[21] and has been crawling the internet since 1996.

For each SNS, I looked at the oldest available impression of their front page. I then moved forward in time, looking at each site on the first day of every month, or the date closest to that if there was no snapshot for that exact day, through to the end of 2010. I created screenshots of my own, and excerpted relevant parts of the websites. These screenshots and excerpts were imported into the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti, for coding and classification.

I did not record data from every single impression I called up from the Wayback Machine, but only when a site's front page had changed from the previous month's version. Thus, changing self-representations over time can be followed, and information, such as the first time that a site presented itself in terms of sharing, could be gathered. When sites undertook a major renovation of their front page, I also visited their About or FAQ pages, assuming that the site had gone through a strategic process that might be reflected in other parts of the site as well, and given that a website's About or FAQ pages often include a longer and more detailed self-presentation than is possible on its front page. However, links off the front page did not always work, and so About, FAQ and Tour pages could not be as systematically collected as front pages. Therefore, the main arguments presented below rest on data collected from the front pages of SNSs, with other pages from those sites occasionally drawn upon to provide further examples.

Looking at the homepages of forty-four SNSs for a period of a decade reveals changing uses of the word 'sharing' alongside its notably increased prevalence. In the most general terms possible, 'sharing' in this context has come to mean participating in social media. In what follows I characterize the features of this new type of sharing and uncover their logics. In doing so, I point to three main characteristics of sharing in SNSs: the appearance of fuzzy objects of sharing; use of the word 'share' with no object at all; and deploying the notion of sharing where it was not used before.

Fuzzy objects of sharing

If I call an object of sharing *concrete*, I mean that we immediately know what is being shared. The clearest example of this is photos: when Flickr presents itself as 'The best way to store, search, sort, and share your photos',[22] we know precisely what is being shared. Likewise, when the SNS Multiply tells us to 'Share interesting web sites' (10 December 2004)[23] we understand right away that we are being encouraged to give our friends links to internet sites, and the same is true of the text published on YouTube's site in 2005: 'Easily share your videos with family, friends, or co-workers' (19 August 2005). Online photos and videos are not exactly tangible, but, given that they have offline equivalents, they are more so than objects of sharing such as thoughts, opinions, advice and ideas. Yet these too are reasonably concrete, and if we are asked to 'share thoughts with [our] friends' (Xanga.com, 4 December 2003) then it is pretty clear what is expected of us.

However, this is not the case with the new usage of sharing that characterizes SNSs. Particularly notable here are instances where users are urged to share their 'life', their 'world' or their 'real you', a term that appeared on the front page of Bebo at least up until May 2012. For instance, when, in 2007, LiveJournal says that it 'lets you express yourself, share your life, and connect with friends online' (25 April 2007), the object of sharing is *fuzzy* in that it is not obvious what sharing your life actually entails. This is also true of the phrase 'share your world', which appeared on the front page of Microsoft's Windows Live website (13 July 2011).

Significantly for my argument that we have here a new meaning of sharing, *the terms 'share your world' and 'share your life' do not appear before 2007* on any of the sampled websites. The idea of sharing your world is quite dense: on the one hand, to share your world with others is to tell them everything that is going on with you – what you are doing, thinking and so on. This draws on the sense of sharing as communication. However, sharing your world also includes uploading your photos to photo-sharing websites. Thus, Fotolog used to run with the tagline 'Share your world with the world' (23 January 2007) and Flickr used to exhort users to 'Share your life in photos'. Sharing your world or life would therefore appear to include a variety of communicative and distributive mechanisms. However, the rhetoric of sharing your world, and particularly that of sharing your life, also implies that you should not be alone: sharing your life is the opposite of living your life in isolation. I must share my life because it is distinct from your life, and the assumption is that you cannot know about my life unless I share it with you. Moreover, the way to share my life, according to the Windows Live site, is to 'Stay in touch', and this via 'Email, photos, movies, video, chat, and more', thus creating an association between sharing one's life and technologically mediated relationships.

In sum, the first objects of sharing in SNSs were concrete, and the use of the word 'sharing' here drew on familiar talk of file sharing (both in the sense of making your files accessible to others, and in the sense of distributing them). While sharing still has concrete objects today, these have been joined by fuzzy objects of sharing, which vastly extends the scope of what we are expected to share to include our lives or our worlds. In this context, sharing is more about communication than distribution, and is at one and the same time both much vaguer and far more inclusive.

No object of sharing

If the previous characteristic showed the emergence of the use of the notion of sharing with a fuzzy object, this one demonstrates the use of sharing without an object at all. This is

significant for two main reasons. First, it reflects an assumption that users do not need to be told what to share, that the word is quite understandable without an object. Second, even more than when sharing is used with a fuzzy object, the total lack of an object gives the word a certain density. Taken together, this brings us closer to the understanding of sharing as the mode of participation in SNSs. Perhaps the clearest example of this social media sense of sharing is provided by the front page of Facebook, where we are told that 'Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life'. Likewise, in May 2012, MySpace's front page said that we can '1. Follow, 2. Get the latest, 3. Share' without saying exactly, or even fuzzily, what it is that we are to share.

This kind of usage of the notion of sharing *does not appear before 2005*, which suggests that only then did SNSs assume their users would be familiar enough with the idea of sharing to use it without an object: we no longer needed to be told *what* to share. In other words, in the examples just cited, the word 'share' serves as shorthand for 'participate in this site', while covering the range of possible activities in such sites – updating statuses, uploading photos, commenting on others' statuses, recommending links and so on.

If the use of the notion of sharing without an object reflects a belief among SNSs that users know what sharing is – that is, that a new meaning has taken root – it also enables multiple readings of the word. This was hinted at above in relation to the phrases 'share your world' and 'share your life'. However, when the word 'share' appears by itself, with not even a fuzzy object, then it is even more striking and the new meaning of sharing discussed here is even clearer. When the word 'share' appears by itself, its meaning is both clear and yet very dense. It is clear in that we know exactly what it refers to: the use of new ICTs, especially those through which we let other people know what we are doing, thinking or feeling, or – and these are usually the same technologies or platforms – through which we recommend websites and video clips to our friends. In saying that this meaning is dense, I mean that it includes a very wide range of practices: status updating, photo sharing, reviewing a book on Amazon, tweeting and so on. Finally, it is worth noting that this sense of sharing extends the communicative turn mentioned above

in relation to fuzzy objects of sharing, though not at the expense of its distributive aspects. When enjoined to 'Share!', the logics of sharing include both telling people things and giving people things, though with the digital twist noted above that it is not a type of giving that depletes one's stock.

Wasn't sharing, now it is

The final aspect of the social media sense of sharing is that it has come to incorporate practices that existed a decade or more ago but that were not then called sharing. The widespread adoption of the term – particularly during 2005–7 – thus suggests that those using it seek to harness more than just its technical meaning of certain aspects of computer-mediated communication.

This point can be made through examples taken from the same website at different points in time. In 2005, for instance, Bebo's front page listed thirteen different things that members of the SNS could do there, including 'Write and Draw on other peoples' [*sic*] White Boards' and 'Keep in contact with friends at other Universities' (17 May 2005). However, in 2007, Bebo's front page was redesigned to include the text: 'Bebo is a social media network where friends share their lives and explore great entertainment' (14 November 2007). Furthermore, in 2009, a newly added graphic suggests that we 'Invite Friends to Share the Experience' (19 October 2009). So while the functionality of Bebo did not significantly change between 2005 and 2009, the way it presented that functionality did, in particular by adopting a rhetoric of fuzzy objects of sharing.

This is a process that can be seen in other sites as well. For instance, in 2002, the front page of the photo-sharing site Fotolog contained the text 'Make it easy for friends/family to see what's up with you' (5 June 2002). In 2007, though, it introduced the tag line 'Share your world with the world'. When the blogging SNS LiveJournal launched in 1999, it invited users to 'come and create your very own LiveJournal. Let the world know the story of your life, as it happens!' (27 November 1999). This is very much the same idea that is expressed through the phrase 'Share your life', and indeed,

in 2006, the front page of LiveJournal included the text: 'Share your thoughts and photos with your friends' (1 March 2006). By 2007, the shift to the social media meaning of sharing was complete, as the site declared, 'LiveJournal lets you express yourself, share your life, and connect with friends online' (25 April 2007). This, then, is a clear example of how a single activity is represented differently at different points in time: 'Letting the world know' has become 'sharing'.

Why 'Sharing'?

Having outlined the meaning of sharing in the context of social media, I offer three answers to the question of why 'sharing' has become the term to describe participation in social media.

First, the notion of sharing is tightly interwoven with the history of electronic computing, from time sharing through to file sharing. As such, it is a term that was known by and very much available to developers of SNSs, who were certainly not the first to talk about transfers of data and information in terms of sharing.

Second, the notion of sharing, as it occurs in the context of social media, is extremely versatile. More specifically, if the 'traditional' definitions of sharing can be crudely divided into those in which sharing is communication and those in which sharing is distribution, now the concept of sharing incorporates both communication *and* distribution, especially when it is used with a fuzzy object, or with no object at all. Sharing on SNSs involves the *distribution* of digital content, in the form of links, photos, video clips and more. In this sense, I share something by letting someone else have it as well. Yet sharing on SNSs is also, and importantly, about *communication*, particularly through the practice of updating one's status. Here, sharing is telling. At least some of what we are encouraged to share on SNSs is our feelings, and so there is an overlap between a common spoken use of the term and its social media meaning. However, letting people know your opinion of current events, your location, or any of the minutiae of your day-to-day life is, in social

media, also called sharing. Another way of thinking about this is to suggest that 'sharing' in the context of social media covers both the transmission and ritual conceptions of communication, with their respective emphases on the 'extension of messages' and 'fellowship and commonality' (Carey, 1989: 18).[24] With the rise of sharing on social media we have another example of 'industrially-driven, technologically-mediated message machines (the press, cinema, and broadcasting) [...] shar[ing] semantic quarters with the venerable arts of interpersonal talk' (Peters, 1994: 117).

The activity of sharing in social media is thus remarkably broad – far broader than any of the other words that might be found in SNSs' earlier self-descriptions, such as 'express', 'connect', 'post', 'blog' or 'socialize'. For sites that want you to distribute photos *and* communicate your emotions, the notion of sharing covers all bases.

The third part of the explanation for the spread of the notion of sharing lies in its positive connotations of equality, selflessness and giving, in combination with its resonance with what is viewed as the proper mode of communication between intimates. In brief, sharing is associated with positive social relations, as expressed through the popular phrase 'sharing and caring', which has been appropriated by SNSs so as to infuse their services with the positive implications of that term. This idea is well exemplified through a reading of Facebook's blogs about itself and developments in the services it offers. For instance, in a blog entry from 2009, we are told that

> [t]he Share button enables you to take content from across the Web and share it with your friends on Facebook, where it can be re-shared over and over so the best and most interesting items get noticed by the people you care about.[25]

Disregarding the fact that if the content you have shared is 're-shared over and over' it is unlikely that you will even know the people who are noticing it, let alone care about them, the connotation of this quote is quite clear: your sharing is an expression of your caring. A similar rhetorical move was made by Yahoo! on the front page of its Pulse network, which included the text: 'Share what's important to you with the

people you care about' (19 July 2011). Windows Live Spaces presented itself similarly in 2006: 'Windows Live Spaces is a free online software service where you can blog, share pictures and connect with the people you care about' (2 September 2006). Finally, on Bebo's About page, we learn that 'Bebo is a popular social networking site which connects you to everyone and everything you care about.'[26]

Of course, it is not only SNSs or social media enterprises more generally that have harnessed the positive connotations of sharing. For instance, in a British ad campaign from 2011, mobile telephony company T-Mobile ran with the slogan 'Life's for Sharing'. One ad, for example, tells us that 'Some things in life you just have to share', followed by an offer of free minutes. This suggests that the idea of sharing has grown in popularity in spheres beyond the internet and has become a useful term for marketing purposes.

Sharing on social media, then, is a concept that incorporates a wide range of distributive and communicative practices, while also carrying a set of positive connotations to do with our relations with others and a more just allocation of resources. This, of course, is not to say that people participate in SNSs as an expression of their care for the people with whom they are sharing, but it is to say something about why this word, and not any of the others mentioned above, has become the *sine qua non* in the self-presentation and the praxis of SNSs.

Sharing and Mystification

In this section, I propose to focus on the rhetorical power of the notion of sharing and to show how it serves to paper over the commercial aspects of the ways in which many SNSs operate. Put differently, I wish to highlight the seeming inconsistencies, not to say contradictions, between the rhetoric of sharing as described above, and the actual practices of SNSs.

While the critiques of social media are many and varied, of most relevance here are those that deal with the ways in which SNSs and other social media enterprises make money, or those that explain how companies use social media tools

and platforms to exploit the 'free labour' (Terranova, 2000) of the users of and visitors to these platforms (see also Fisher, 2015). This critique has two distinct targets. The first is the use of people's free labour to perform tasks that the company would otherwise pay people to carry out. This is the thrust of van Dijck and Nieborg's (2009) critical analysis of Web 2.0 manifestos, which attacks the tendency of companies to crowdsource certain tasks (and see also Morell, 2011). The second target of critiques of social media is the way that they monetize their users' activities. That is, Facebook makes money not by asking its users explicitly to perform tasks for Facebook, but rather by aggregating and selling the data produced by the members' interactions with one another on the site and, through the Like button and Facebook's 'frictionless sharing', with other sites. What these and other critiques throw light on is the way that, through increasingly sophisticated techniques of data mining, SNSs are able to sell website real estate to advertisers based on the promise of targeted advertising at an unprecedented resolution (Zarsky, 2002). These ideas, which have been formalized by researchers (see, for instance, Fuchs, 2011; Zimmer, 2008), were succinctly if pithily expressed by a user of MetaFilter, a weblog community: 'If you're not paying for something, you're not the customer; you're the product being sold.'[27]

In brief, there are two ways in which the use of a rhetoric of sharing on Facebook (and elsewhere) serves to mystify the commercial relations just mentioned. The first is the idea that the more we share (note: no object), the better the world will be. This can clearly be seen in the letter Zuckerberg attached to Facebook's IPO (initial public offering) filing in January 2012.[28] There, he writes that 'Facebook was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission – to make the world more open and connected', and that Facebook's objective is to 'strengthen how people relate to each other'. Relationships, continues Zuckerberg, 'are how we discover new ideas, understand our world and ultimately derive long-term happiness.' Moreover, '[p]eople sharing more – even if just with their close friends or families – creates a more open culture and leads to a better understanding of the lives and perspectives of others.' Here, then, sharing is represented as a mechanism for improving human relations

and making the world a better place.[29] (For an analysis of this and other letters attached to high-tech IPOs in which the CEOs claim they are not in it for the money, see Dror (2013).) I shall leave the critique of the use of 'sharing' by Facebook to Frick and Oberprantacher, who bemoan the fact that 'the very institution which has defined *connecting* and *sharing* its unique selling proposition is itself a profit-oriented enterprise that is neither reflecting the idea of *the commons*, nor is it up to public scrutiny' (Frick and Oberprantacher, 2011: 22; emphasis in original).

The second mechanism of mystification involves the way in which Facebook's relationships with advertisers are described in terms of sharing. The following quote expresses this well, whereby Facebook seeks to assure users that 'we don't share information we receive about you with others unless we have received your permission'.[30] Regardless of the fact that the quotation is expressed in the negative, the relationship between Facebook and its advertisers is represented in terms of sharing; that is, the transmission, or selling, of data by Facebook to advertisers is described as sharing. Facebook is most certainly not alone here. Under the heading, 'Information we share', Google's privacy policy (in July 2016) included the statement: 'We will share personal information with companies, organizations or individuals outside of Google when we have your consent to do so.'[31]

It is possible that high-tech companies are using the word 'sharing' in a neutral way, similarly to time sharing in the 1950s. However, when Facebook, Google and others talk about sharing information about us with third parties, rather than selling it, or even just transferring or sending it – two much more neutral terms – a parallel is created between our online social interactions with our friends on the one hand, and commercial interactions involving some of the wealthiest organizations on the planet on the other. This is not to say that this is an intentional move on the part of the SNSs. As already mentioned, the word 'sharing' would have been accessible to them from its pre-existing associations with computing, as well as from the popular meaning of sharing as talking about one's feelings. However, it is still the case that every time we share something online, we create traces of data, which constitute the hard currency of commercial

social media organizations. The more we share online, the richer the online platforms we are sharing on become.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the rise and rise of 'sharing' in social media, offering an analysis of what is, for all intents and purposes, the constitutive activity of social media. It has shown that 'sharing' has become the word of choice to describe the values of the internet at large, and the way in which we participate in social media in particular. We have seen how the word builds on more 'traditional' meanings of sharing, enfolding within it both distribution and communication as well as the usage of sharing in the context of computing. The data show that the years 2005–7 constitute a watershed in terms of the use of the concept of sharing. Terms such as 'share your world' or 'share your life' did not appear before then; similarly, the injunction to share (without any object at all) did not appear until the second half of the 2000s. I also showed how certain activities, such as keeping in touch, over time came to be described as sharing. Finally, I offered a critique of how the notion of sharing as deployed by Facebook serves its self-representation as leading to a better world, as well as helping to mystify its commercial relations with advertisers.

The rise of sharing in social media, or the way that 'sharing' became their constitutive activity, is understood here in relation to a popular conception of the internet as democratic, open and free, and as a platform for non-hierarchical communication. Turner and others have shown us how the internet was constructed as prosocial; the notion of 'sharing' came later. This idea was captured by a Twitter user: 'The internet has always been about sharing, "Sharing" is not a new thing, it's a catch phrase but the core essence has always been, sharing.'[32] Similarly to the quotes mentioned at the start of this chapter, here too we read the 'internet has always been about sharing'. This tweet notes that 'sharing' may be a 'catchphrase', but that sharing has always been at the 'core essence' of the internet. 'Sharing', then, is both a kind of

Platonic form of which the internet partakes *and* a catchphrase – as indicated by the quotation marks round the second instance of the word in the tweet. Catchphrases come and go; core essences do not. In this chapter, I have shown that 'sharing' has enjoyed an ascendancy that might make it seem like a catchphrase, or buzzword. I have also shown that there is something about how we understand the internet today that resonates with the values we associate with sharing. However, this is not because of the internet's 'core essence', but is rather the function of discursive work carried out by, among others, its early users.

Today it certainly feels as if the 'core essence' of the internet is 'sharing'. This is because, as demonstrated above, the term has come to cover the gamut of online activities, while the internet as an abstract whole is seen by many as responsible for specific positive processes, such as the Arab Spring. If 'sharing' is a central metaphor in contemporary society, its role as the constitutive activity of social media, and perhaps the internet at large, is a crucial part of that.

him' – the sharing, then, is of the other's suffering (Curry, 1935).

7 The reader can get an idea of common associations with the term 'sharing is caring' by conducting a Google Images search. Be prepared for puppies, children sharing ice cream and rainbows.

Chapter 3 Sharing and the Internet

1 For a transcript of the TED talk this quotation is taken from, see: <http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together>.

2 Sharing is Daring, at: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/sharing-is-daring/2214737130>.

3 Of course, there are other narratives of the internet wherein it is and always has been psychologically and socially harmful, or a surveillance tool in the hands of the state and corporations, and so on. However, such conceptualizations of the internet are not relevant to my efforts to understand the place of 'sharing' in online contexts.

4 Again, this is not to deny the existence of a strong dystopian stream of writing about the internet. However, because I am interested here in how and when sharing became the *sine qua non* of prosocial internet use, work that has focused on the anti-sociality of the internet is out of my scope.

5 I am aware of the problematic nature of this term, including its implicit teleology and the way it ignores previous iterations of online sociability and user-generated content. I use it here to refer to that time in the history of the web that Web 2.0 generally refers to – the mid-2000s.

6 Other instances include Streeter (2011) and Flichy (2007).

7 Except in the context of virtual communities being organized around shared interests, which is quite a different usage of the word.

8 Lawrence Lessig also posed himself this question (Lessig, 2008), and we shall see how he answered it in Chapter 4.

9 This section is based on an article published in *New Media & Society* (see John, 2013a).

10 I'm all for sharing, but why the online obsession with revealing every detail of your life?, Charlie Brooker, *Guardian*, Sunday 29 January 2012. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jan/29/sharing-obsession-revealing-every-detail>.

11 Improving Sharing Through Control, Simplicity and Connection, at: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/improving-sharing-through-control-simplicity-and-connection/101470352130>.
12 Facebook Expands to Include Work Networks, at: <https://newsroom.fb.com/News/217/Facebook-Expands-to-Include-Work-Networks>.
13 The Next Step, at: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/the-next-step/2207522130>.
14 Note once again the rhyme. Sharing is Daring, at: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/sharing-is-daring/2214737130>.
15 Share is Everywhere, at: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/2215537130>.
16 Facebook® Enables Users to Share Video, Photos, News, Blogs and More From Anywhere on the Web, at: <http://blog.photobucket.com/facebook_enable/>.
17 See: <http://www.michaelgalpert.com/post/140737454/the-many-faces-of-facebook> for Facebook screenshots that document its changing tagline from 2004.
18 See Facebook's About page, at: <https://www.facebook.com/facebook/info>.
19 The sites studied were: AsianAvenue, aSmallWorld, Badoo, Bebo, BlackPlanet, Care2, Classmates, Dodgeball, Facebook, Fiverr, Flickr, Flixster, Fotolog, Friendster, Habbo, hi5, Last.fm, LinkedIn, LiveJournal, Meetup, Multiply, MyLife, Myspace, Myyearbook, Netlog, Orkut, PerfSpot, Piczo, SixDegrees, Skyrock, StumbleUpon, Tagged, Tribe.net, TwitPic, Twitter, Viadeo, WeeWorld, Windows Live Spaces, Xanga, XING, Yahoo! 360, Yfrog, YouTube and Zorpia.
20 See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites>.
21 From the Wayback Machine's About page, at: <http://archive.org/about/faqs.php#The_Wayback_Machine>.
22 See: <www.flickr.com/help/general>.
23 Dates in parentheses refer to the date the site was crawled and saved by the Wayback Machine.
24 Similarly, Peters notes that 'Cooley reveals the inner affinity of the two senses of "communication": communication as transfer or transportation and as the communication of psyches' (Cooley, 1894; in Peters, 1999: 184).
25 See: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/keeping-count-of-sharing-across-the-web/165161437130>, 26 October 2009.

26 See: <http://www.bebo.com/c/about>, 31 January 2010.
27 See: <http://www.metafilter.com/95152/Userdriven-discontent>.
28 Widely available online, for instance at: <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/mark-zuckerberg%E2%80%99s-ipo-letter--why-Facebook-exists.html>.
29 The HBO comedy series, *Silicon Valley*, pokes fun at this idea in almost every episode.
30 See: <http://www.facebook.com/about/privacy/your-info#howweuse>.
31 See: <http://www.google.com/intl/en/policies/privacy>.
32 See: <https://twitter.com/PRODesigns/status/628563915203563521>.

Chapter 4 Sharing Economies

1 At the time of writing a federal judge in San Francisco allowed Uber drivers to bring a class-action lawsuit against the company. By the time you read this, Uber may have changed greatly from what it was in late 2015.
2 Perhaps, ultimately, this part of the sharing economy will turn us into what Gina Neff (2012) calls 'venture laborers', or will result in the taskification of the workforce, as suggested by Mary Gray (see: <http://marylgray.org/?p=357>).
3 The P2P Foundation hosts a set of very critical magazine articles. See: <http://p2pfoundation.net/Sharing_Economy#Discussion_2> for links.
4 See: <http://www.collaborativeconsumption.com>.
5 The interface offers results from 1800, but there are none for this particular search before the first blip seen in Figure 4.2 (p. 73).
6 See: <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/stories/2005-06-19/the-power-of-us>.
7 See: <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/business2/business2_archive/2004/05/01/ 368240/index.htm>.
8 See: <http://joi.ito.com/weblog/sharing-economy>.
9 In another translation, *Urgeschichte* is rendered as 'primal past' (Bird-David, 2005: 205).
10 The term 'hyper-individualist' is interesting. More specifically, the prefix, 'hyper-' is interesting. Botsman and Rogers also deploy it in front of 'consumerism'. The difference between 'individualism' and 'hyper-individualism' is unclear, but it would seem that the 'hyper-' prefix somehow protects the