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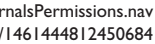

Sharing and Web 2.0: The emergence of a keyword

Nicholas A. John
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Abstract
Sharing is the constitutive activity of Web 2.0. But when did 'sharing' become the term used to describe the activities that constitute participation in Web 2.0? What does sharing mean in this context? What is its rhetorical force? This paper argues that a new meaning of sharing has emerged in the context of Web 2.0 with three main features: fuzzy objects of sharing; the use of the word 'share' with no object at all; and presenting in terms of sharing functions of social network sites that used not to be so described. Following a critique of the use of the notion of sharing by social network sites, the article concludes by suggesting affinities between sharing in Web 2.0 and in other social spheres.

Keywords
Facebook, internet, sharing, social network sites, Wayback Machine, Web 2.0

Introduction

Sharing is the fundamental and constitutive activity of Web 2.0 in general, and social network sites (SNSs) in particular. By Web 2.0 I mean internet services based on user-generated content, most famously Facebook, but also YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, wikis, blogs and a host of others, all of which encourage us to 'share' in various ways: countless websites have some kind of 'Share' button that enables the surfer to bring the page to the attention of others; the web's largest dedicated photo-sharing site, Flickr, urges the visitor to 'Share your photos'; on Facebook, where we are encouraged to 'connect and share

Corresponding author:
Nicholas A. John, Department of Communication and Journalism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mt. Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel.
Email: nicholas.john@mail.huji.ac.il

with the people in your life', the act of posting a status update is also called 'sharing'; and so on. In brief, the word that describes our participation in Web 2.0 is sharing.

But when did 'sharing' become the term used to describe these activities? What does sharing mean in the context of Web 2.0? What rhetorical force does it have in this regard? By offering answers to these questions this article hopes to introduce to the field of internet research a discussion of sharing, technology and culture, which, perhaps surprisingly, is entirely lacking from academic writing about contemporary ICTs.

This is not to say that the activities included within the term sharing have not been studied. They have been, and extensively so, producing a plethora of concepts. Web 2.0 is one such concept. Like Beer and Burrows (2007), I use the term to refer to 'a cluster of new applications and related online cultures that possess a conceptual unity only to the extent that it is possible to decipher some significant socio-technical characteristics that they have in common'. Other familiar analytical concepts include that of the prosumptive internet, for which Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) provide the examples, inter alia, of Facebook, eBay, Amazon and Yelp. Prosumption refers to the collapse of production and consumption into one another, and for Ritzer and Jurgenson, as well as many others (see especially Benkler, 2006), Web 2.0 'is currently both the most prevalent location of prosumption and its most important facilitator as a "means of prosumption"' (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010: 20). Similarly, though with a focus on popular culture, Jenkins analyzes 'participatory culture', noting that while today's participatory culture 'has its roots in practices that have occurred just below the radar of the media industry throughout the twentieth century, the Web has pushed that hidden layer of cultural activity into the foreground' (Jenkins, 2006: 137).

Importantly for this paper, while the researchers just cited and many others offer notions with which to conceptualize the wide range of practices that their concepts claim to subsume, my analysis does not seek to apply a name to a set of observed phenomena, but rather to interrogate the name that has already been given to the practices that underlie those phenomena. For example, while Jenkins et al. (2009) propose the term 'spreadability' in place of the concept of 'memes', and Shifman (2012) makes a strong argument for the continued pertinence of the latter notion, by focusing on sharing, this article sidesteps those debates: regardless of whether we talk about spreadable media or memes, the practice of posting a video to YouTube, or distributing the link to a YouTube clip, is called sharing. Accordingly, this paper is agnostic regarding terms such as 'participatory culture', 'prosumption' and 'Web 2.0', and sets out from the observation that the practices that constitute them are called sharing.

This article is based on a qualitative analysis of the use of the words 'share', 'sharing' and other derivatives in 44 of the largest and most significant SNSs from 1999 through to the present day. Drawing on data collected through the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, it shows that the word sharing took on a new meaning during the first decade of the 2000s, and especially during 2005−7. Specifically, three main features of the use of the word share in the context of SNSs are presented: first, it starts to be used with what I call *fuzzy objects of sharing*. These are expressed through terms such as 'share your life' or 'share your world' (phrases which do not appear before 2007), and contrast with concrete objects of sharing such as photos; second, from 2005 the word share starts to appear with no object at all, without specifying what it is that we are expected to share. This can

be seen in terms such as 'Connect and share', or even in the single-word imperative, 'Share!' I argue that this use of the word is only possible once users are familiar enough with the terminology of SNSs to understand that sharing is shorthand for participating in the site; third, there is a shift to presenting in terms of sharing functions of SNSs that used not to be so described. By comparing the website of the same SNS at different points in time, it is possible to see that the word share is incorporated to describe in a new way practices that have not significantly changed.

Having described these new features of the notion of sharing in the context of SNSs, a critical gaze is cast over the appropriation of the positive connotations of sharing by the commercial organizations that reap the financial rewards of our usage of them. In particular, it is argued that references to the transfer of data about users to advertisers as 'sharing information' with third parties serve to mystify relationships that are in fact purely commercial. At the end of the article some connections between sharing in Web 2.0 and sharing in other social spheres are suggested.

The meanings of 'sharing'

The concept of sharing is an undertheorized one, and explicit interrogations of the concept are quite rare (though see Belk, 2010; Wittel, 2011). This is unfortunate, because while we all feel we know what sharing is, the concept actually includes a number of differing logics that we would do well to distinguish between. In this section I point to two of these logics − a distributive and a communicative logic − before very briefly surveying the use of the term sharing in the field of computing.

The Oxford English Dictionary teaches us that in the sixteenth century, the verb 'to share' meant 'to cut into parts' or 'to divide'. A plowshare, therefore, which is the cutting edge of the plow, is so called because it 'shares', or splits, the earth. Likewise, when a child shares their chocolate bar they divide it: they break it up into shares, or parts. In this sense, the act of sharing is one of *distribution* and it is an active practice. Importantly, it is also a zero-sum game − when I give you some of my candy, I am left with less. Sharing as distribution is, of course, governed by cultural norms. These norms, for instance, are the subject of Katriel's (1987) description of ritualized sharing and exchange among children, as well as constituting one of the main focuses of the early anthropology of hunter-gatherer societies. From this it is clear that sharing, whether it involves the distribution of either candies or prey, is constitutive of social relations.

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 both of them, and the dorm room 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.

In addition to being an act of distribution, sharing can also be an act of communication.[1] This is the case when we talk about sharing our feelings or emotions. This sense of sharing − which, of course, is not a zero-sum game − would appear to be somewhat

newer. Indeed, the OED's first citation for the meaning of sharing as 'to impart to others one's spiritual experiences' dates back to 1932 and is offered in the context of the Oxford Group, a Christian movement popular in the 1920s and 1930s. From here it is 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 (Cameron, 2000; Carbaugh, 1988). While sociologist of emotions Eva Illouz does not herself define sharing, this sense of the word is unmistakable in her definition of the therapeutic ideal as 'the injunction to share all needs and feelings' (Illouz, 2008: 227). Similarly, in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's book on intimate life, they describe a 'far-reaching transition. What used to be a team sharing the work [i.e. pre-modern agricultural families] has turned into a couple sharing emotions' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 48). Similarly to the act of sharing a candy bar, the sharing of emotions also creates and regulates social ties. Additionally, as Wuthnow explains when discussing a woman who was forced out of a support group for talking too much, the sharing of emotions, like the sharing of treats, also entails 'explicit norms about reciprocity' (Wuthnow, 1994: 156).

While these are the primary meanings and logics of sharing, it is worth noting that the word also has a specific history in the context of computers. Briefly, the idea of sharing has been central to computing ever since the possibility of time-sharing was first floated in the late 1950s. Time-sharing involved a number of users quite literally sharing a computer, whose time was divided between those users. But while the practice of time-sharing was made redundant by the introduction of minicomputers, and later on personal computers, sharing nonetheless remained relevant, only now in terms of disk-sharing and file-sharing. In one sense, disk-sharing and file-sharing displayed the same logic of sharing: they both referred to resources (hard drives and files) that were remotely accessible; that is, they were shared, in the sense of being in common. However, file-sharing also came to mean the copying of digital information (software, music or video files), which at least partly explains the current catch-all status of sharing in digital contexts as referring to the transfer of data. Here the logic of sharing is different again: there is no zero-sum game (as in time-sharing), and nor are we talking about shared resources. Rather, this kind of sharing involves letting someone else have something that you have (somewhat akin to sharing a candy bar) though without entailing any kind of material sacrifice on the part of the sharer. Not only is this not a zero-sum game, but it is a form of sharing that leaves us with more than when we started.

This paper draws on these meanings of sharing and demonstrates the emergence of another sense of the word, arguing that it offers a lens through which to observe what is known as Web 2.0.

Methodology

The research presented in this article uses methods associated with grounded theory, whereby the field is approached without a preformed theory to be tested in light of the data (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is especially suitable for the inductive research presented here: as mentioned above, the stimulus for the research was the observation that sharing is the word used to describe our participation in Web 2.0, and the preliminary objective of the study was to understand and

characterize this phenomenon with no prior commitment to any particular theory. This is not to say that one approaches the field with no knowledge of it or the theoretical issues that may be pertinent to it: as Dey put it, 'there is a difference between an open mind and an empty head' (Dey, 1993 in Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 47).

This article is based on analyses of the 44 largest, most visited and historically significant SNSs.[2] 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 (Wikipedia, 2011); and the section on the history of SNSs in boyd and Ellison's survey of the field (2008: 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'[3] and has been crawling the internet since 1996 (Feise, 2000). The Wayback Machine − which has been validated as a viable research tool (Murphy et al., 2007) − has been used by a variety of researchers and for a variety of purposes, most of which involve tracing changes over time in online environments. For instance, Hackett and Parmanto (2005) analyzed the development of higher education websites to test for the adoption of accessibility features, while Chu et al. (2007) studied the evolution of e-commerce websites, and Morris (2010) studied the development of online music offerings.

In theory, the Wayback Machine enables users to see what a website looked like at any date since 1996 and is an extremely powerful and useful research tool. However, a number of limitations of the Wayback Machine should be noted (see Murphy et al., 2007; Veronin, 2002). First, it does not crawl the entire web every single day, and so sometimes there are gaps between one snapshot of a website and the next. Second, images from websites are not always stored properly, meaning that the pages are not necessarily rendered exactly as they originally appeared. Third, the Wayback Machine can only crawl sites written in HTML, and not in JavaScript, say. Fourth, and finally, sites are able to exclude themselves from the Wayback Machine. It should be stressed that these limitations do not pose serious problems to the current study. The only large SNS to have blocked the Wayback Machine is (unfortunately) Facebook, but other web curators have saved old versions of the site's homepage (see below).

For each SNS, I looked at the oldest available 'snapshot' 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 snapshot 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 presents itself in terms of sharing, can be gathered. When sites undertook a major renovation of their front page, I also visited their About or FAQ pages, based on the assumption 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.

Finally, a note about Facebook: Facebook excludes web crawlers such as the Wayback Machine's. However, snapshots of its front page from years past have been independently curated[4] and can be found using online image searches. Because a discussion of SNSs would be incomplete without reference to Facebook, the screen captures that I found were included in the overall sample and treated like the other items. It should be stressed, though, that excluding Facebook from the sample does not change the findings reported in the following section.

Grounded theory entails an iterative process of data collection and analysis known as theoretically sensitive sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, especially Chapter 3). Accordingly, having characterized sharing in the context of Web 2.0, and with an eye to developing a critique of the use of the word, a second phase of data collection was undertaken. Given the centrality of Facebook in today's SNS environment, blogs and press releases from the Facebook site were collected and analyzed. Uses of the words share, sharing and other derivatives were found by searching Facebook's blog archive and by using the 'site:' feature in Google. These materials are discussed in the penultimate section of this article.

Through a process of multiple readings, each instance of sharing was coded, and these codes were then collected into families of codes. In grounded theory, these stages of coding are known as open coding and axial coding respectively (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). First, all of the *objects of sharing* were coded. Objects of sharing are the things that are described as being shared. They include photos, blogs and contact information, but also experiences, thoughts and 'your life'. Uses of sharing where there is no object were also coded as such. These are instances where the word share does not have an object, such as 'It's fun to share'. Having coded all instances of sharing by object, families of codes were constructed. For example, instances of sharing as distribution were distinguished from instances of sharing as communication. Sharing as distribution refers to sharing where its purpose is to give something to someone else, even if it is a non-tangible thing (like a link, a blog post or a digital photo). Sharing as communication refers to uses of the word share that are more or less synonymous with 'tell'.

Sharing in Web 2.0

In this section I show that the notion of sharing has taken on a new meaning in the context of Web 2.0. In the most general terms possible, sharing in this context quite simply means participating in Web 2.0. 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',[5] we know precisely what is being shared. Likewise, when the SNS Multiply tells us to 'Share interesting web sites' (10 December 2004)[6] 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 today. Particularly notable here are instances where users are urged to share their 'life', their 'world', or their 'real you', a term that currently[7] appears on the front page of Bebo. 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 currently exhorts 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 (cf. boyd, 2006 on 'imagined egocentric communities'), 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 Web 2.0 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, MySpace's front page says 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. Other examples are provided by the tagline of the SNS, PerfSpot, which runs 'Socialize. Share. Discover. Create', or by text from the business-oriented SNS, Viadeo, where users are encouraged to 'Share & communicate'.

This kind of usage of the notion of sharing does not appear before 2005, which suggests that SNSs assume their users should now be familiar enough with the idea of sharing to use it without an object: we do not need 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 in this article 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 (for instance, after clicking the 'Update Status' link on Facebook, the text box that appears contains the words, 'What's on your mind?') 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 Web 2.0 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- or mobile device-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 13 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 tagline, '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 Web 2.0 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'?

So far I have outlined the meaning of sharing in the context of Web 2.0. In this section I offer three answers to the question of why sharing has become the term to describe participation in Web 2.0.

First, the notion of sharing is tightly interwoven with the history of electronic computing, from time-sharing through to file-sharing. As such, it was 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 Web 2.0 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 on Facebook or Twitter. Here, sharing is telling. Part 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 the Web 2.0 meaning. However, letting people know your opinion of current events, your location or any of the minutiae of your everyday life is, in Web 2.0, also called sharing.

The activity of sharing in Web 2.0 is thus remarkably broad − far broader than any of the other words that might be found in SNSs' 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 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

> The 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. (Facebook, 2009)

Disregarding the fact that if the content you have shared is 're-shared over and over' then 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, in Bebo's current About page, we learn that 'Bebo is a popular social networking site which connects you to everyone and everything you care about'.

Of course, it is not only SNSs or Web 2.0 enterprises more generally that harness the positive connotations of sharing. In a British ad campaign from 2011, mobile telephony company T-Mobile ran 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. In contrast, it is interesting to note that, on founding the company in 1999, the then CEO of Zipcar banned her staff from using the phrase 'car-sharing' on the grounds that it 'makes people nervous' (Levine, 2009). Today, though, the term 'car-sharing' appears three times in the first two sentences of the company website's About page.[8] This suggests that the idea of sharing has grown in popularity in spheres beyond Web 2.0 and has become a useful term for marketing purposes.

Sharing, 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 − the reasons people participate in SNSs are beyond the scope of this article − 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 focus on the rhetorical power of the notion of sharing and 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 Web 2.0 are many and varied, of most relevance here are those that deal with the ways in which SNSs and other Web 2.0 enterprises make money, or those that explain how companies use Web 2.0 tools and platforms to exploit the 'free labor' (Terranova, 2000) of the users of and visitors to these platforms. This critique has two distinct targets. The first is the use of people's free labor 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 crowd-source certain tasks. The second target of critiques of Web 2.0 in general, and SNSs in particular, 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 new 'frictionless sharing' with other sites. What these and other critiques throw light on is the way that, through 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.'[9]

While an in-depth analysis of the political economy of SNSs in general, and of Facebook in particular, is beyond the scope of this paper, I would nonetheless like to indicate 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 Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg attached in January 2012 to Facebook's IPO filing. 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, 'People 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.

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'.[10] 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 more accurately the selling, of data by Facebook to advertisers is described as sharing. Facebook is not alone here. Under the heading, 'Information we share', Google's new privacy policy of March 2012 includes the statement: 'We will share personal information with companies, organizations or individuals outside of Google when we have your consent to do so.'[11]

While this article generally adheres to an emic approach to the usage of the word sharing in Web 2.0, at this point a line has to be drawn. Although it is easy to understand why Facebook (or any commercial organization) would be happy for its business relationships to be represented in such friendly and non-threatening terms, especially given Facebook's turbulent history regarding privacy, the market-driven exchange of data cannot reasonably be viewed as sharing, and the use of that rhetoric can be seen as mystifying the commercial logic that underlies Facebook and many other SNSs.

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 preexisting 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 organizations in Web 2.0.

Conclusion

This article has presented the rise and rise of sharing in Web 2.0, offering for the first time an analysis of what is, for all intents and purposes, the constitutive activity of SNSs. It has shown that sharing has become the word of choice to describe the way in which we participate in Web 2.0, and that this 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. As described above, 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 either. I have also shown how certain activities, such as keeping in touch, came, over time, to be described as sharing. Finally, I have 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.

If Raymond Williams' classic, *Keywords* (1983), were to be revised for the 2010s, then a strong case could be made for including 'sharing' as a crucial concept in contemporary culture and society, if only due to its centrality to Web 2.0. However, as suggested by the example of car-sharing, the notion of sharing goes far beyond Web 2.0 (see John, in press). Indeed, the sphere of so-called 'sharing economies' would seem particularly worthy of further study, especially because they appear to interface with sharing in Web 2.0 in interesting ways. Sharing economies are economies that operate without money changing hands and whose goal, by and large, is not to make its participants richer.[12] There are two types of sharing economies: economies of production and economies of consumption. Yochai Benkler (2006) is the leading figure in academic writing about sharing economies of production (but see also Lessig, 2008), which have been popularized through the best-seller, *Wikinomics* (Tapscott and Williams, 2006). Contemporary sharing economies of consumption, or the 'Collaborative Consumption' movement, are yet to receive serious academic attention, though they too have been the subject of best-selling popular books, most notably *What's Mine is Yours* (Botsman and Rogers, 2010).

Sharing economies resonate with sharing in Web 2.0 in that some of the latter's most notable examples are also the standout examples of sharing economies, such as Wikipedia. However, it is also pertinent that many of the technologies behind websites that are built on user-generated content have been created in the context of sharing economies of production (such as Perl, PHP, Java and more). Indeed, it could even be argued that, inter alia, the entire internet is fundamentally a sharing technology. In addition, sharing economies of consumption, while not a product of the twenty-first century, are currently enabled by network technologies (examples include Zipcar, Airbnb and even eBay).

In other words, adding to the study of Web 2.0 and SNSs the sphere of sharing economies in our productive and consumptive lives might contribute to a broader understanding of the contemporary logics of sharing. Steps toward such an understanding might include a phenomenological study of users' experiences of SNSs through the prism of sharing, or a cross-cultural comparison of the words into which sharing is translated in internationalized versions of SNSs, which might shed light on whether the findings presented above apply equally to non-English-speaking environments. By focusing on sharing as the constitutive activity of the nebulous group of platforms and technologies that comprise Web 2.0, and by striving to unpack its meanings and to account for its near ubiquity in online contexts, this article has laid some of the groundwork for further research into sharing.

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Notes

1. The distinction between sharing as distribution and sharing as communication is not quite as clear-cut as I present it here. Sometimes, by distributing something I intend to communicate something, such as when SNS members update their profile picture to convey their emotional state or a political message (see Kim and Yun, 2007).
2. The sites surveyed for this article 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.
3. www.archive.org/about/faqs.php#The_Wayback_Machine (accessed 25 July 2011).
4. For instance at http://facebookcraze.com/tag/old-facebook-layout/ (accessed 28 February 2012).
5. www.flickr.com/help/general/ (accessed 31 July 2011).
6. Dates in parentheses refer to the date the site was crawled and saved by the Wayback Machine.
7. References to 'current' versions of websites are correct as of May 2012.
8. www.zipcar.com/about (accessed 3 February 2012).
9. www.metafilter.com/95152/Userdriven-discontent (accessed 5 March 2012).
10. www.facebook.com/about/privacy/your-info#howweuse (accessed 1 March 2012).
11. www.google.com/intl/en/policies/privacy (accessed 1 March 2012).
12. It should be noted, though, that sharing economies are presented in some circles as a tremendous business opportunity (see, for instance, Gaskins, 2010).

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Nicholas A. John is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His research interests include new media and the interface between technology and society. He is currently writing a book that explores the concept of sharing across a range of social locations, including the internet, sharing economies and the therapeutic narrative.