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20 Sharing

Abstract: In digital culture, sharing is a metaphor used to describe and explain a variety of digital practices, network infrastructures and associated values. It is closely aligned with social media where to share is to post, to speak, to listen, to upload, to download and with the sharing economy's offer of access to goods and services via an online platform. Although sharing seems ubiquitous and constitutive of online culture and has a long history as a term in computing that dates to the mid-twentieth century, it is not until the late 2000s that its meaning shifts, conflating the distributive and communicative senses of the verb. Recognizing this shift offers insight into how in the twenty-first century moral ideals about altruism and free expression are linked to economic goals and why the age of sharing has also become a time of rising inequality, centralization of power and increasing commercialization of culture and social relations.

Keywords sharing, sharing economy, internet history, metaphor, distribution, remix

Sharing is a key concept in digital culture, a metaphor used to describe, explain, and defend many common online practices; sharing is also associated with common internet-related ideals about participation and cooperation, efficiency and optimization, openness, transparency, and decentralization. The verb sharing has two meanings: it can refer to distribution—to divide into parts—or it can refer to communicative practice—to express yourself. Both tend to have positive connotations. We generally think it is good to share whether we are talking about cookies or feelings.

Digital sharing, however, represents a significant shift in meaning, conflating the distributive sense of the word sharing with its communicative sense (John 2016). This elision mirrors the convergence of media enabled by digital technologies and the new socio-technical practices to which digital sharing refers. Although the term sharing has a history in computing that dates to the mid-twentieth century, contemporary sharing is strongly associated with the rise of social media in the late 2000s and is aligned with a valuing of cooperation, transparency and efficiency (John 2016). In the 2010s sharing also came to be associated with new modes of peer-to-peer commercial activity enabled by online platforms as typified by businesses such as Uber or Airbnb and known as the 'sharing economy' (John 2014; 2016), a phrase that persists into the 2020s.

Metaphors are key animators of digital network technologies, and sharing is a digital metaphor that makes sense of a variety of online activities including posting media content (e. g. I shared a photo on Instagram), the social distribution of digital files (e. g. file sharing practices and platforms), and the facilitation of new commercial markets for labor and services (i. e. the 'sharing economy'). Metaphors draw parallels and make the unfamiliar understandable through analogy; they describe and explain (c.f.

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Borschke 2017, 33–40; Herman 2006; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Loughlan 2006). Digital culture is rife with metaphors that we rely on to make sense of technologies and techniques of Internet-mediated social life including infrastructural metaphors such as the cloud, the desktop, file, folder, etc. and practice-oriented metaphors such as sharing, remix, streaming, ghosting and so on. Each of these metaphors have material, social and intellectual histories in addition to their etymologies and a variety of media scholars interested in identifying and understanding the relationship between technology and culture have focused on overlooked histories and shifts including John (2016) on sharing, Borschke (2017) on remix, Bollmer (2016) on networks, Hu (2015) on the cloud. Cultural and technological shifts are rarely clear cut and one of the benefits of focusing on these metaphorical histories is to begin to untangle and identify what is new about the digital and to distinguish what is unique about the present from how digital technologies remediate past media and practices. In doing so we gain insights into how the social shapes the technological and vice versa, deepening our understanding of the meaning of cultural challenges and rhetorical struggles.

Sharing is Social Media

Contemporary social media is strongly associated with the practice of sharing media—to 'share' images, videos, music, or text is to post, stream, download or annotate files, and to read, listen, examine, annotate and copy the files others have shared. To be social online *is* to reproduce media or 'share' it—sharing describes a variety of modes of mediated communication enabled by digital technologies and their associated techniques of reproduction and distribution. As a metaphor, sharing is both descriptive and explanatory, offering a way to identify practices and to understand how the technical reproduction of media can be experienced as communication and how this communication can simultaneously be a mode of distribution. In the digital sense sharing is synonymous with digital copying, but unlike copying, which is tied up with digital debates about authorship, copyright, originals and copies (c.f. Boon 2010; Borschke 2017; Lessig 2004, 2008; Vaidhyanathan 2003), sharing is associated with a positive set of internet values including collaboration, transparency and efficiency.

It may seem as if sharing is baked into the architecture of social media—sharing appears to be what platforms were designed to facilitate and it is often what they promote and monetize—however, Nicholas John's (2016) analysis in *The Age of Sharing* shows that it was not until the mid 2000s that sharing became the preferred term for social media participation. While the reproduction and networking of digital media assets was already a constitutive internet practice in the early 2000s, the rhetoric of Web 2.0 was more specific, entreating us to participate by posting, friending, commenting and (the ever mysterious) poking etc. rather than reach for the word sharing. It is worth considering that this same period there was widespread conflict and debate between the internet users and the music industry over 'file sharing,' a conflict that coincided with the rise and fall of techno-social innovations such as Napster and

other platforms and techniques for sharing music such as Limewire and mp3 blogs. It was often fans rather than the music labels who first made music available online by posting 'ripped' copies of their favorite tracks to peer to peer platforms and on the web. Users were energized and excited by these new socio-technical techniques for finding and listening to music from other listeners and, as is common in popular music cultures, they often explicitly valued the social aspect of digital discovery and distribution, and were simultaneously frustrated by the music industry's slow uptake of the internet. Many of these users were also influenced by their own experiences of popular music subcultures where the reproduction of analog recordings and knowledge about recordings was a significant form of participation, be it the making and trading of mix tapes or bootlegs, homemade zines and newsletters. A spirit of sharing taste as well as sounds was crucial to connecting people in underground music communities, as was developing alternative distribution and performance networks. Informed by their previous participatory practices, users in the late 90s/early 2000s imagined the internet as a celestial jukebox while the music industry seemed stuck on selling units. Industry efforts to protect copyright in the context of these new technologies appeared more like a defense of a business model that didn't serve fans or artists particularly well (Borschke 2017, 113–122).

Authors' rights and users' rights clashed. Copyright regulated copying, but in a digital networked environment copying was a necessary, routine part of producing, accessing, reading and distributing a work. As Siva Vaidhyanathan (2003, 152) identified, digital convergence and its collapsing of boundaries had many unintended consequences: "[C]opyright was designed to regulate only copying. It was not supposed to regulate one's right to read or share." When reproduction was a matter of course, should copying be seen as sharing? If copying as a technique enabled distribution *and* communication, then copyright laws and norms and conventions around copying threatened imposing restrictions on new modes of speech that were aided by digital reproduction and networks.

In the 2000s, legal scholar Lawrence Lessig (2001; 2004; 2008) wrote several powerful polemics in defense of users' rights and against the expansion of copyright, the context of digital technology, and the internet. Sharing and remix were key concepts he relied on in his work, using them to develop the alternate Creative Commons licensing scheme which would enable digital access to flourish with a different sense of ownership and legal rights than those built into copyright law. Drawing on Yochai Benkler's ideas about commons-based peer production (2006), Lewis Hyde's analysis of the social significance of sharing in *The Gift* (1983), and Henry Jenkins' (2005; 2006) work on fans, convergence, and participatory culture, Lessig's arguments also promoted an instrumentalized idea of sharing where cooperation and collaboration are both virtuous and efficient, an internet ideal that is closely associated with open source software and the development of network technologies (Borschke 2021). In *Remix*, Lessig builds on these ideas and approaches and is thought to be the first to use the phrase 'sharing economy' to describe an existing but overlooked part of vernacular media culture

"where access to culture is regulated not by price, but by a complex set of social relations" (Lessig 2008, 145).

Lessig's coinage was about the non-commercial, but this instrumental understanding of participation and the internet captured imaginations and proved to be malleable —new modes of peer-to-peer commerce that relied on social media type platforms and practices such as Uber, Airbnb and many food delivery apps adopted the sharing economy to describe their business models. 'Sharing' could now be used to describe the ability to access assets and services for rent, a way of imagining sharing that is focused on the optimization and monetization of assets and time. Sharing became a synonym for use, regardless of whether that use was free or paid. As such, sharing was easily embraced by both free marketeers and free culture devotees, a rhetorical move that enabled them to defend the new possibilities that digital media afforded. That said, the commercial use of sharing often prompts protest—'that's not really sharing!'—and it is indeed ironic that a term that aimed to capture the non-commercial aspects of cultural life would instead, become symbolic of internet-enabled hyper capitalism at a time of rising inequality. Regardless, the plasticity of sharing and the rhetorical weight of sharing as a defense, secured its status as a constitutive internet activity in the 2010s and beyond.

Sharing is Technical: File Sharing and the Long History of Sharing in Computing

Before it was social or rhetorical, the term 'file sharing' was technical, used to describe any number of platforms and techniques for the distribution of media assets by making copies of files available to be copied. Nicholas John (2014, 201–204) locates the origins of the term in the history of computing rather than as the defense that it came to be. Sharing was adopted by computer scientists in the mid-twentieth century as the preferred term for describing a variety of technical solutions to scarcity. Sharing here referred to efficient methods or approaches for distributing scare computing resources in the 1950s and 1960s, a time when computers filled rooms and were owned only by large institutions. Sharing computing resources gave more researchers access, and the efficiencies prompted the rise of networking technologies and protocols such as PCP/IP that would become the backbone of the internet. By pooling and dividing computing resources academic scientists also developed a new, efficient mode of cooperative organization for solving complex computing problems—later dubbed commons-based peer production by Yochai Benkler (2002)—and strongly associated with a preference for open source software, where the code could be studied, copied and modified (Stallman 2002). Peer production valued non-hierarchical and decentralized collaboration to efficiently solve shared computing problems. The extraordinary and surprising efficiency of open source approaches to developing software contributed to the rise of cooperation and sharing as virtues deeply entangled in the commercial

ideology of Silicon Valley, where the cold calculations of optimization regularly align with the warm fuzziness of sharing.

In the mid-twentieth century computing sharing was infrastructural, originating in a context of resource scarcity; but in the early twenty-first century, sharing had taken on rhetorical weight and came to be a defense of file sharing and other copying techniques in the context of abundant and ubiquitous computing power. It is under circumstances of abundance that sharing becomes thought of as the constitutive internet activity and thus available to all. Disputes over whether actions are accurately described as sharing highlight tensions and contradictions produced when the distributive and communicative senses of sharing are conflated. While 2000s-era battles over 'file sharing' and copyright seem distant in this era of cloud computing and streaming media, the power of the metaphor originates in these early broadband conflicts. As with many network metaphors (e.g. remix, the cloud, etc.), sharing attempted to make sense of how the infrastructures of digital culture, conflate and merge communication and expression with circulation and reproduction. Notably, many of our metaphors seek to deemphasize and obscure the copying that is crucial to all digital practices both as a means of virtualization—to make the complex more elegant and simpler (Hu 2017, xxvii)—and as a rhetorical cover in the context of long standing anxieties about copies and originals that stem from Romanticism and underpin copyright (Borschke 2017, 2020; Boon 2010). Sharing's superpower was that it had positive connotations that copying did not.

Sharing is rhetorical

In digital culture, sharing is a metaphor used to describe and explain a variety of digital practices, network infrastructures and associated values. It is closely aligned with social media where to share is to post, to speak, to listen, to upload, to download and with the sharing economy the offer of access to goods and services via an online platform. Although sharing seems ubiquitous and constitutive of online culture and has a long history as a term in computing that dates to the mid-twentieth century, it is not until the late 2000s that its meaning shifts and its current usage became widespread. Nicholas John's *The Age of Sharing* and related scholarship made several key contributions to our understanding of sharing in the digital age, pinpointing how digital sharing conflates the communicative sense of the word sharing (i.e. to express oneself) with its distributive sense (i.e. to divide into parts) and in the process adopted the democratic values associated with speech as well as the altruistic and non-commercial associations of sharing as a kind of distribution. Although sharing has lost some of its shine in the marketing of social media (John 2024), these positive values continue to be evoked even when sharing is used to describe new modes of commercial activity enabled by online platforms as it is when we talk about the 'sharing economy' and businesses such as Airbnb and Uber. This shift in the meaning of sharing also conflates ideals about sharing as a moral good with the idea that sharing is efficient and optimal. These elisions

make sense of technological convergence and its blurring of boundaries, but they are also sources of tension and are especially prominent in discussions and debates about the commercialization or monetization of sharing, be it via the social and economic ramifications of the sharing economy or concerns about the monetization of online participation and the erosion of the public sphere.

Disputes over whether actions are accurately described as sharing highlight tensions and the contradictions of conflating the distributive and communicative senses of sharing. But sharing is also a defense, a rhetorical cover in debates about digital culture. In the era of cloud computing and streaming media, 2000s-era battles over 'file sharing' and copyright seem distant but the rhetorical force of many of the metaphors that we use to make sense of the internet continue to be marked by these early broadband conflicts and concerns about copying. As with many network metaphors (e.g. remix, the cloud, etc.), sharing attempts to make sense of how the infrastructures of digital culture enable communication and distribution while also deemphasizing and obscuring the copying or reproduction that is crucial to all these digital practices. In digital culture, sharing is instrumentalized: to increase computing power, to organize efforts, to defend vernacular practices and to enable the monetization of digital platforms. Recognizing this shift offers insight into how moral ideals about altruism and free expression are attached to economic goals. The internet was supposed to break down hierarchies by enabling equal access and collaboration but instead the twenty-first century—the age of sharing—was marked by rising inequality, centralization of power and increasing commercialization of culture and social relations. Work that critically addresses the tensions and contradictions of sharing in digital culture, offers insights into the material, social and rhetorical shifts of the present and our recent past, and reminds us that the future is ours to share and imagine.

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