



Share city

Description

In his book on the “sharing economy,” Arun Sundararajan maintains that commerce is shifting away from traditional corporations and toward a crowd of entrepreneurs we find through a digital marketplace” (6).

Within the constellation of these new (shared) business models he places [Airbnb](#), a platform that allows individuals to capitalise on their own under-utilised domestic space. More localised services such as [Lyft](#) in San Francisco provide platforms for private car owners to offer lifts to trusted (registered) passengers.

[Kickstarter](#) provides a method for peer-to-peer funding arrangements for startups and people with promising ideas. [Trade School](#) provides a learning community in which individuals offer to teach a skill to others in exchange for some other good or service in a kind of barter arrangement.

Digital cooperatives

The sharing economy continues the tradition of grass roots cooperatives, many of which grow into fully fledged companies with far reaching networks. The digital economy amplifies, extends and accelerates the creation of such innovations, which in turn impact on the city. Sundararajan thinks it is significant that this sharing can now take place not just between people who know each other, but amongst *strangers*. The sharing economy extends and reconfigures relationships of trust.

Such sharing initiatives act as a foil against some areas of urban living that speak of increased state and corporate control, centralisation and regularisation in the digital age. Think of mass surveillance, the power of financial institutions, mass media, and the ways IT companies now wield unprecedented influence over people’s social interactions.

Cities in flux

Are inhabitants of cities experiencing a digital revolution towards a more open, connected and trusting society? Perhaps we are simply succumbing to increased centralisation and control under the sway of

digital networks. I think it is more realistic to assert simply that cities and their inhabitants undergo reconfiguration, as they have always done.

Cities are in flux, subject to plays of power between antagonistic forces. It has always been so, except that the pace of change varies now and again. Who amongst us inner city residents has yet caught up with the social and financial implications of short term and opportunistic peer-to-peer property rentals, facilitated by services such as Airbnb?

The idea of the sharing economy borrows from what cities do anyway. Cities are made up of families, communities, neighbourhoods that have been described by some as societies of the gift. See my earlier post [Crowdfunding in the gift society](#).

The new kid on the block

The blockchain scenario (see [my posts](#) on the theme) provides further analogues with city living, not least as we think of the data intensive “smart city,” the overlay of integrated and responsive digital infrastructures that draw on big data streams from mobile apps, sensor networks, social media feeds and transport information, to make buildings and transport systems more responsive to changing conditions.

So far, policy makers assume such infrastructures will operate in a highly-centralised manner. Blockchain technology supports the potential for an alternative, localised, grassroots, and democratic dimension to the smart city.

Cryptocurrencies (built on blockchain platforms) are arguably a response to failing economic systems in cities, though they carry their own perils. After all, much of the narrative force of bitcoin derives from its appropriation by black and grey market traders in cities, particularly in those parts that are failing, or at least that operate under the radar. But then perhaps such tactics contribute to survival in some cities.



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A bibliography on the gift society

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Notes

- For an interesting take on the shared city see Chris Speed's talk about the blockchain city: <https://vimeo.com/138614190>
- Also see <http://designandthecity.eu/programme/lab-of-labs/blockchain-city/>
- Image above is the deserted town of Pripyat, Ukraine.

Category

1. Economics

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