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The sharing economy in social media: Analyzing tensions between market and non-market logics

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ABSTRACT

How is the sharing economy framed and who are the main actors driving current developments? Utilizing Social Media Analytics (SMA) for institutional analysis, we track the formation of the sharing economy in Sweden, its actors and their impact. Our findings reveal that the sharing economy in Sweden currently encompasses a wide variety of both non-market and market practices. Discussions concerning commercial exchanges, the role of profit-driven firms such as Uber and Airbnb, and the emergence of a market logic has created a state of instability. Our results point at several unresolved issues, such as taxation and regulation. Based on these findings, we suggest an expanded definition of the sharing economy which incorporates both market and non-market logics.

1. Introduction

Sharing-economy platforms are gaining momentum in several industries, offering the potential of efficient utilization of resources, novel value creation, and technological disruption whilst also generating institutional turbulence.

Being in its infancy, the field is still riddled with controversies and ambiguities. On one hand, previous research has documented how the notion of a sharing economy and the related term collaborative consumption emerged as descriptions of online activities such as content sharing, collaborative encyclopedias like Wikipedia, file sharing and open-source software, where people are driven by a combination of financial and non-financial motives (Hamari et al., 2015). On the other hand, the term sharing economy has become increasingly associated with a form of platform capitalism where profit-driven entrant firms create two-sided markets (Dreyer et al., 2017) and monetize the interaction between buyers and sellers (Murillo et al., 2017). This form of sharing economy is a truly disruptive force, not only for established firms but also for current institutions, as issues such as tax evasion and regulatory compliance remain unsolved (Laurell and Sandström, 2016, forthcoming). Still being in a fluid state, it is presently unclear how the sharing economy is framed. Additionally, more empirical data is needed regarding ongoing developments within this rapidly transforming area of society.

In this paper, we explore how the sharing economy is framed in

Sweden whilst also pointing out the main actors driving current developments. Utilizing Social Media Analytics (SMA) for institutional analysis, we conceptualize the sharing economy as an organizational field and describe its current state in Sweden, its actors and their impact. Our findings reveal that the sharing economy in Sweden currently spans a wide variety of both non-market and market practices and that the field is currently characterized by instability and tension. Moreover, discussions that concern the framing of the sharing economy are currently dominated by profit-driven firms, most notably Uber and Airbnb. Our data points at several ambiguities that remain unsolved, e.g., taxation and regulation. In view of these findings, we contribute to extant literature by providing a structured analysis of the state of the sharing economy that illustrates its diverse character. Our findings show the importance of incorporating both market and non-market logics into the conceptualization of this phenomenon, and therefore we suggest an expanded definition of the sharing economy toward the end of the paper. As popular accounts on the sharing economy in other countries indicate similar patterns regarding unsolved ambiguities, the results in this paper can, to a certain extent, be utilized to approach other national contexts.

The paper begins with a brief background concerning the contemporary state of the sharing economy and the conceptual approach employed throughout the article. Subsequently, the method is described. Next, our results are presented and analyzed. Finally, we provide a concluding remark together with directions for future research.

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2. Elements of the topic and conceptual approach

The notion of the sharing economy has become subject to a lot of attention and even hype in recent years (Felländer et al., 2015). The term sharing economy and the related notion of collaborative consumption both have their origins in Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-enabled interactions between users on the internet (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Wang and Zhang, 2012) which offer the potential of transitioning societies into a post-ownership economy (Belk, 2014). Whilst the sharing economy and collaborative consumption still tend to be vaguely defined, one of the recently suggested definitions of how the two notions can be related to each other was presented by Möhlmann:

“Collaborative consumption, often associated with the sharing economy, takes place in organized systems or networks, in which participants conduct sharing activities in the form of renting, lending, trading, bartering, and swapping of goods, services, transportation solutions, space, or money.” (2015, p. 193)

The term sharing economy has also been used to advocate the shift toward a more sustainable economy and the emergence of a collaborative commons (Parguel et al., 2017; Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014). This conceptualization of a sharing economy adapts a non-market logic where exchanges are not primarily coordinated via the price mechanism and where actors are largely motivated by factors other than profit, e.g., altruistic values related to sharing, helping others, and contributing to a more sustainable way of life (Prothero et al., 2011; Sacks, 2011).

The social movement described above stands in contrast to current developments of the sharing economy. In recent years, a form of platform capitalism has emerged, using the notion of a sharing economy. Firms such as Airbnb, Uber, and TaskRabbit enable individuals to exchange services via a platform. These firms have received hundreds of millions in venture capital (Alsever, 2013), are driven by profit (Slee, 2016), and compete with established firms, often by creating turbulence and possibly redefining notions of work and employment in the long run.

Taken together, the notion of a sharing economy seems to be riddled with tensions between non-market logics of idealism and a form of platform capitalism driven by for-profit firms (Murillo et al., 2017; Schor, 2014). With this tension in mind, more knowledge is needed about how the sharing economy is framed and which actors are driving current developments. Therefore, the research question we set out to answer is formulated as follows: *How do online discussions in social media reflect market and non-market logics in the field of the sharing economy?*

To explore how the sharing economy is framed whilst also pointing out the main actors related to this framing, we conceptualize the phenomenon of the sharing economy as an emerging organizational field that, based on extant literature, encompasses two institutional logics that continuously contribute to redefining the boundaries of the field. The underlying rationale for doing so is that many of the developments of the sharing economy identified by previous literature resemble the evolution of organizational fields (Mair and Reischauer, 2017). Based on this conceptualization, the sharing economy is approached as an organizational field that seems to be depicted in extant literature as a set of organizations displaying diverse approaches (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), operating within a seemingly nested system (Holm, 1995) and, based on issues related to the non-market or market logics (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999), potentially functioning as a basis out of which the field forms (Hoffman, 1999, cf. Bourdieu, 1984, 1990).

More specifically, extant literature illustrates that the introduction of novelty, such as a new technology, frequently results in the emergence of new business models as well as institutional upheaval (Bohnsack et al., 2016; Ernkvist, 2015; Laurell and Sandström, 2014). When this occurs, institutions, i.e., formal and informal “*humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction*” (North, 1990, p. 3), are

subjected to change. Those actors which are constrained by the same institutional set-up are together referred to as an organizational field (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The process of organizational field formation is dynamic, as fields over time aggregate specific compositions of actors, a certain degree of opposition among them, their relative position within a given field, and their functional weight or extent of power within that field (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990). The degree of stability of a given field depends upon the extent of power and potential influence an actor has upon other actors to change the rules of the game or impose a new set of conditions that change behavior within a given field (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990). Thus, actors' actual behaviors depend upon every part of the field, because the respective parts of a specific field are mutually interdependent (Lewin, 1939). Organizational fields are, therefore, subject to what scholars refer to as the paradox of embedded agency (Seo and Creed, 2002).

When analyzing a specific organizational field at a certain point in time, three dimensions are usually studied: (1) the state of the field in which actors operate; (2) how meanings among actors are diffused; and (3) relations between actors (Hardy and Maguire, 2008).

First, the coexistence of multiple institutional logics in an organizational field, as seems to be the case for the sharing economy, usually represents an enabling condition for changes within organizational fields (Clemens and Cook, 1999; Sewell, 1992). Additionally, institutional change is more easily accomplished in fields that are emerging as institutionalized practices have not yet been established or stabilized. This is particularly the case for emerging fields characterized by fluid relationships, conflicting values, and absence of norms. Under these circumstances, actors can engage in actions which can transform the structure of organizational fields (Fligstein, 1997).

Second, institutional change has been shown to manifest as ongoing and complex struggles over meaning among actors (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; see also Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Phillips and Malhotra, 2008). From this perspective, institutions are created and formed as meanings are shared and taken for granted, but also “*emerge from novel interpretations and ensuring struggles over meaning, although it also recognizes that, because meanings of existing practices are supported by existing logics, myths and discourses, they may not be easily displaced*” (Hardy and Maguire, 2008, p. 205). In this context, Munir (2005) argued that the way in which events and changes are interpreted and given meaning is one of the central aspects of processes of institutional entrepreneurship.

Third, actors who benefit from a certain structural arrangement will be more likely to act to change organizational fields (Maguire et al., 2004). Moreover, being in the periphery of an established field usually implies less embeddedness in an institutional arrangement (Leblebici et al., 1991). Other scholars have regarded institutional change as largely a social challenge (Fligstein, 1997) where actors' abilities to motivate and orchestrate is crucial in accomplishing change. In this context, the discursive dimension has been highlighted as particularly important (Creed et al., 2002; de Holan and Phillips, 2002; Dorado, 2005).

When taken together, these three dimensions—the state of the field, how meanings among actors are diffused, and relations between actors—can be utilized to guide the structure of institutional analysis and, by doing so, study the framing of an emerging organizational field and how institutional logics redefine the boundaries of that field.

3. Method

To explore how the sharing economy is framed and identify which actors are driving current developments, SMA was employed for institutional analysis. Online data collection has been utilized increasingly in recent years, and this development has resulted in the emergence of SMA, an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to combine, extend, and adapt methods for analysis of social media data (Stieglitz et al., 2014). As social media represents “*a kind of living lab, which*

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