

## **Is Sharing An Alternative To Private Ownership?**

Russell Belk \* and Rana Sobh\*\*

*Despite the operating costs, use of scarce natural resources, contribution to air pollution, increased traffic congestion, and a tripled risk of heart attack due to stress (Peters, et al. 2004), each day automobile commuters travel billions of miles alone in their cars. Carpooling or sharing public transportation could help save money, lives, and the planet. But our unwillingness to share means we all suffer. Is this an instance of Garret Hardin's (1968) tragedy of the commons? Perhaps this vision of everyone pursuing selfish ends to the detriment of all is overly pessimistic. This paper asks what are the incentives and disincentives for sharing outside of our family. The battle between shared information on the Internet and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) is a test of new sharing tendencies. We use it to ask whether more sharing is possible in either Middle Eastern or Western societies.*

### **1. Sharing Versus Exchange**

Along with marketplace exchange and gift-giving, sharing is one of the three basic ways in which contemporary consumers acquire possessions. Although both marketplace exchange and gift-giving involve a change of ownership from one person to another, sharing normally does not. Instead there is a sense of joint ownership, either legally or in practice. For example, our spouse and children normally feel a sense of joint ownership of the household refrigerator, food, chairs, television, pets, and telephone, even though these goods may legally belong to the adult members of the family. Family members who share a dog or cat not only share in the benefits and joys the pet provides, but also in the responsibilities it may entail. We share not only tangible possessions but also intangible possessions like a scenic view, a family vacation, or a television program we watch together with others. Telling others about such sights and events is another case of sharing intangible information. As we are using the concept, sharing includes voluntary offering or acceptance and use of something that belongs to one or more people. We exclude theft and trespassing, but include use of public property like a park as well as contractual rental.

---

\*Dr. Russell Belk, York University, SSB, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, ON CANADA M3J 1P3,  
E-mail: [rbelk@schulich.yorku.ca](mailto:rbelk@schulich.yorku.ca)

\*\*Dr. Rana Sobh, Qatar University CBE, PO Box 2713, Doha QATAR, E-mail: [r.sobh@qu.edu.qa](mailto:r.sobh@qu.edu.qa)

We also exclude non-voluntary coincidences like “sharing” a first name or home town. And we focus on consumer sharing rather than the producer sharing that occurs with employee-owned companies and stock markets.

Because egoistic exchange is not its rationale, sharing is relatively neglected within economic and business models of consumption. Sahlins (1972) suggested three types of reciprocity. Balanced reciprocity describes most gift-giving and marketplace exchange in which each party gets something of approximately equal value. Negative reciprocity may characterize some marketplace exchange like deceptive selling, in which one person tries to get more than they give. Finally, generalized reciprocity is when the partners give freely without keeping track of how much is given versus received. Presumably this characterizes sharing within the family, although there need not be any reciprocity per se. Economists conceive of consumption as being made up solely of exchanges. Sharing does not fit well with this assumption. Both sharing and gift-giving also differ from market exchange in that they create or reinforce social bonds between those involved. On the other hand, in marketplace exchange, the participants need not ever see one another again.

Gregory (1982) elaborates on the distinction between gifts and marketplace exchanges, noting that whereas market exchange establishes quantitative equivalence between objects and, with immediate payment, creates no lingering obligations, gift exchange establishes or reinforces qualitative relationships between people and creates lingering obligations for the recipient of the gift to make a counter-gift sooner or later. Ideally gift-giving is staggered in time, so that there is always a debt. This is a view that has generated some criticism for creating too sharp a distinction, but it also has a number of supporters (e.g., Frow 1997). The most influential treatment of the gift continues to be Mauss's (1967). He stresses the reciprocal nature of the gift and the obligations to give, receive, and repay. If this appears to stress the similarities of the gift to marketplace exchange, the ritual elements of gift exchange (e.g., special wrappings, clothes, songs, and expressions of gratitude) help to distinguish the gift both from marketplace exchange and sharing (Belk 1979; Sherry 1983). It has also been suggested that some gift giving may be an expression of agapic love with little thought of return (Belk and Coon 1993). At the same time others have suggested that gifts often violate characteristics of a true or pure gift (e.g. Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1992) or that such violations of gift ideals mean that the gift really does not exist and all is instead steeped in personal interest (Derrida 1992). Money is a gift that threatens to reveal gift-giving as nothing more than commodity exchange (e.g., Webley, Lea, and Portalska 1983), But if the gift sometimes takes on elements of the commodity exchange, marketplace can also take on characteristics of the gift, including interpersonal bonding (Carrier 1995). Despite such fuzziness at the boundaries, sharing, gift-giving, and marketplace remain conceptually distinct.

A key prototype of sharing is the use of possessions and resources within the family. One ideal model of such family sharing is income pooling—an example of the Marxian formula of from each according to abilities and to each according to needs. Caring for young children is not only a legal responsibility, but a moral and even biological

imperative. We usually do not make them pay room and board, nor do we give them an itemized bill for our services when they leave home. But while such family care is clearly not marketplace exchange, some anthropologists (e.g., Sahlins 1972; Godbout and Caille 1998) treat it as gift-giving. We disagree and believe that the everyday use of resources within the family lacks the formal ritual of gift-giving and is better regarded as sharing.

Another basic prototype for sharing is the mother sharing her body during pregnancy, birth, and nursing her infant. This too is clearly neither marketplace exchange or gift giving, even though some theorists call these gifts (e.g., Godbout and Caille 1998; Vaughan 1997). We do see the incursion of some marketplace exchange with surrogate mothers, sperm banks, and wet nurses, but these are exceptions rather than the norm. The same is true of hired help for housework, commercial childcare, and paid sex or prostitution. Even though such practices have a long history, they have not supplanted the basic role of family as a caring, sharing, child-rearing group of close kin bound by their mutually helping one another.

## **2. Problematizing Sharing**

Although sharing has likely been the dominant form of distribution among humans for several hundred thousand years (Price 1985), recent developments on the Internet have created new interest in the topic. Through developments including Internet file sharing (e.g., Giesler 2006), online chat rooms, bulletin boards, list serves, and web sites, as well as collaborative open source code writing, collaborative online games and virtual worlds like Second Life, and wikis like Wikipedia, new realms of sharing have emerged. Such developments have led some to conclude that we are entering a new era of sharing (e.g., Coyne 2005, Ghosh 2005). This is also reminiscent of the democratic ethic that surrounded the initial development of personal computers as a way of empowering ordinary people by sharing (Belk and Tumbat 2005).

But at this time of unprecedented sharing brought about by electronic interaction, there has also been a dramatic corporatization and privatization of formerly public and individual property through Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) and extending the protections of copyrights. This is seen in battles over sharing of digital music, films, software, and written material, battles to own genetic codes by pharmaceutical companies and other bioprospectors, and claiming ownership over cultural rituals and folklore (e.g., Barnes 2006; Brown 2004). Universities have long been a bastion of shared knowledge based on the premise of the Scientific Revolution that science will progress much more rapidly by freely sharing information than by secretly hoarding it like the alchemist of old. But even this model is changing as universities scramble to lock up patents and copyrights before this information is shared (David 2005).

As these new developments suggest, sharing or not sharing are learned behaviors. Children in the West learn private ownership, then sharing (Furby 1976), and eventually fairness (Furby 1978). In nomadic and formerly nomadic societies like Australian Aborigines, sharing is a stronger learned pattern than possessiveness, which has led to

problems as the European system of private property was imposed on them (Gould 1982; McKnight 2002). And in Africa there is a strong tradition of hospitality that means that when distant relatives come from the countryside, they should be fed and housed for as long as they wish to stay (Belk 2000).

### **3. Barriers to Sharing Outside the Household**

Possessive individualism and the feelings of attachment are barriers to broader sharing (Kleine and Baker 2004). A part of this feeling of attachment derives from the idea that these things are not only ours, they are us – a part of our extended self (Belk 1988; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995).

Materialism, defined as the importance we attach to possessions as sources of happiness or unhappiness in life (Belk 1985), is another factor inhibiting sharing. The more materialistic we are, the more possessive, non-generous, and envious we are and these traits discourage sharing. It might seem that with the development of mechanical and digital reproduction of images everyone has access to art. With museums, books, and the Internet we can all view the works of the masters (Malraux 1967). Nevertheless, fine art continues to command extraordinary prices. Benjamin (1968) suggested that reproductions and copies lack the aura imparted by the artist creating the art work. However, the reason that we denigrate copies as fakes, frauds, counterfeits, and forgeries may have more to do with the status that we attach to having the original.

### **4. Incentives to Share Outside the Household**

#### **4.1 Sharing Intangibles**

Academia is a realm of sharing intangible knowledge with students and colleagues. Publishing is a sharing of ideas with anyone who wants them. We don't look as favorably on someone who sells their ideas through consulting. However we also take ownership of our ideas and study findings by publishing. And we are much less willing to share our raw data (Sieber 1991). But sharing raw data in the Human Genome Project led to important discoveries in medicine and biology that would have otherwise been impossible (Love and Hubbard 2005). SETI@home (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) using thousands of home computers is another collaborative example.

One encouragement for such sharing is that there are many intangibles like jokes, songs, recipes, and information that we can share without losing them. On the Internet we may share with millions of others. A prime example is Linux and other open source software to which thousands of code writers have contributed freely and largely anonymously (Bergquist and Ljungberg 2001). A further motivation for contributing to such intangible sharing communities is the feeling of cornucopia that comes from going online and realizing the endless resources available there that could never have been constructed by a single individual. Since unknown others have helped us, we may wish to somehow pay back their generosity. Just as we share with our children with the hope

that they will pass their own resources along to their children, we may feel gratefulness to those who have shared with us and a desire to keep this generosity flowing (Hyde 1983). The same is true of reviewing academic papers for journals. Others have done so for us and it seems only fitting that we do so for others. In such a cornucopia model, sharing is out of joy; there is no concern with direct reciprocity and thus no concern with free riders.

## 4.2 Sharing Tangibles

Although it is difficult to imagine not sharing intangible information with someone who asks for directions or the time of day, sharing tangible goods is more of a challenge because we lose or risk losing what is ours. While sharing the hospitality of offering travelers free room and board was once commonplace and remains so in some cultures and subcultures (e.g., Jones 1996), it is now largely restricted to extended family. The notion of a sharing community is also increasingly restricted the extended if not the nuclear family (e.g., Fiske 1991; Komter 2005). But there are exceptions. Think of the school girls or boys who may share their clothing and music with one another in order to increase their wardrobes and music collections. There is always a risk of loss or damage to these possessions, but so long as everyone abides by the same rules, everyone wins. There area also institutionalized versions with sharing co-ops for automobiles (Jonsson 2006) and a Portland, Oregon service that allows subscribers as many different designer handbags as they like (one at a time) for a monthly fee (Wingfield 2005). In each of these cases participants leverage their lifestyles and consume a larger and more varied set of things than they could otherwise afford.

But what of giving money to a beggar or picking up a hitchhiker on the highway. These people will likely never return the favor. One explanation may be that, like the cornucopia model of the Internet, there a sense of paying back the kindness of strangers. Genuine altruism and caring about humanity is another potential motivation, although some would argue that there is still a personal benefit in thinking well of oneself, striving to secure a place in heaven, or building up a reservoir of good will so that others may be more likely to share with us in the future. Likewise there are religious prescriptions for charity like the principle of *Zakat* (obligatory charity) which is the third pillar of Islam, after the testimony of faith and prayers. The *Zakat*, institutionalized in Islamic law, constrains everyone to give the equivalent of 2.5 percent of their wealth to the poor "Of their goods take alms so that thou mightiest purify and sanctify them..." (Al-Qur'an, 9: 103). The principle of sharing in Islam is intertwined with that of brotherhood or the notion of *Ummah* – the community of faith. (Khanam, 2003). As Etzioni (1988) suggests, when we feel a shared identity with others – whether in our neighborhood, faith, city, state, or nation – we feel a common sense of moral obligation toward them. And in the broadest sense we all share a common humanity that may provoke sharing with others with whom we can empathize in their time of need.

While the early Christian church leaders promoted a more extreme communism of common ownership, this sharing was short lived and is now dominated by the individualism of Protestantism (Cort 1988, Tanner 2005). Similarly, while early

Christianity condemned usury and unjust prices, unlike Islam these concerns have disappeared. But both religions retain a concern for the poor, both spiritually and materially by sharing wealth in one way or another (Chapra 1992).

Other world views may also be an incentive to share our tangible goods with others. Foster (1969) distinguished between a limited good society where one's person's gain is seen as another's loss (a zero-sum game) and an unlimited good society where there is more than enough for everyone. If we hold a limited good world view we are less likely to share. But if we see the world as having unlimited bounty we are likely to share fruits that we have found along a trail, because we believe there will be more ahead. Even when we see the world as a zero sum game, we may be happy to share a newspaper we have finished reading or a concert ticket that we can't lose. Allowing gleaners to pick up leftovers from fields after a harvest (something legally mandated in France) is also done because these things would otherwise go to waste.

## 5. Conclusions

Given the battles between growing Internet sharing and IPR as well as the ethical issues raised in the marketization and privatization of many once shared things like blood, organs, semen, and community resources locked behind gated communities, this is an important time to more explicitly consider issues of sharing. Much more work remains to be done, but some initial conclusions may be suggested.

Even within the nuclear family and communal organizations like Israeli kibbutzim, we can see a shrinkage in sharing and an increased sense of private possessions. Despite the ideal of income pooling and allocation within the family, as more family members have their own sources of income and as the family itself becomes a less stable institution, bank accounts, credit cards, and possessions become increasingly privatized. True social security in the sense of shared resources, is being challenged by independent financial security. Neighborhoods and communities are increasingly composed of strangers. Ironically virtual communities online may now be a more likely locus for sharing our secrets, opinions, wisdom, and information. The open science model of academia is threatened as biologists, engineers, doctors, and others seek to lock up patents and copyrights before publishing and thereby sharing their work.

Laws like those guaranteeing public access to fields, forests, and beaches or gleaning, hunting, and fishing, help to regulate sharing of the commons as well as some private property. Larger barriers remain however with possessive, materialistic, and individualistic attitudes and values. Even though some have suggest that we moving into a post-materialist age (e.g., Inglehart 1981) or an experience economy (e.g., Pine and Gilmore 1999), there is little evidence of a groundswell of increased sharing outside of the Internet. At the same time, given the greatly increased value when we share something like a language or technologies like the fax or cell phones, it is possible to reverse Hardin's tragedy of the commons and see something more like a comedy. That is, with each of these things, the more people share it, the more useful it becomes to

everyone. The Internet is like that. And perhaps these forms of sharing will promote a more general spirit of sharing that carries into other realms of life. Time will tell.

## References

- Barnes, P. 2006. *Capitalism 3.0: A Guide to Reclaiming the Commons*, San Francisco: Berret-Koehler.
- Belk, R. 1979. Gift-giving behavior. In *Research in Marketing*, Vol. 2, J. N. Sheth (Ed.), 95-126. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Belk, R. 1985. "Materialism: Trait aspects of living in the material world. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 12 (3):265-280.
- Belk, R. 1988. Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15: 139-68.
- Belk, R. 2000. Consumption patterns of the new elite in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 20:204-205.
- Belk, R. and G. Coon. 1993. Gift giving as agapic love: An alternative to the exchange paradigm based on dating experiences. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20: 393-417.
- Belk, R. and G. Tumbat. 2005. The cult of Mac. *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 8: 205-218.
- Benjamin, W. 1968. The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In *Illuminations*, H. Arendt (Ed.), Harry Zohn (Trans.), 219-53. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Bergquist, M, and J. Ljungberg. 2001. The power of gifts: Organizing social relationships in open source communities. *Information Systems Journal*, 11:305-320.
- Brown, M. 2004, "Heritage as Property," in Katherine Verdery and Caroline Humphrey, ed., *Property in Question: Value Transformation in the Global Economy*, Oxford: Berg, 49-68.
- Carrier, J. 1995. *Gifts and commodities: Exchange and Western capitalism since 1700*. London: Routledge.
- Chapra, U. 1992. *Eslam and the Economic Challenge*, Leicester, UK: Islamic Foundation.
- Cort, J. 1988. *Christian Socialism: An Informal History*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

- Coyne, R. 2005. *Cornucopia limited: Design and dissent on the Internet*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- David, P. A. 2005. From keeping 'nature's secrets' to the institutionalization of 'open science'. In R. Ghosh, 85-108.
- Derrida, J. 1992. *Given time. I, Counterfeit money*, P. Kamuf, trans., Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Etzioni, A. 1988. *The moral dimension: Toward a new economics*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Fiske, A. P. 1991. *Structures of social life: The four elementary forms of human relations, communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing*, New York, NY: Free Press.
- Foster, G. M. 1969. Peasant society and the image of limited good. In *Applied Anthropology*, G. M. Foster, 293-315. Boston, MA: Little Brown.
- Frow, J. 1997. *Time and commodity culture: Essays in cultural theory and postmodernity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Furby, L. 1976. The socialization of possession and ownership among children in three cultural groups: Israeli kibbutz, Israeli city, and American. In *Piagetian research: Compilation and commentary*, Vol. 1, edited by S. Modgil and C. Modgil, 95-127. Windsor, UK: NFER Publishing.
- Furby, L. 1978. Sharing: decisions and moral judgments about letting others use one's personal possessions. *Psychological Reports*, 93:595-609.
- Ghosh, R., editor. 2005. *Code: Collaborative Ownership and the Digital Economy*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Giesler, M. 2006. Consumer gift system: Netnographic insights from Napster. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 33:283-90.
- Godbout, J. T. and A. Caille 1998. *The world of the gift*. D. Winkler, trans. Montreal, QU: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Gould, R. A. 1982. To have and have not: The ecology of sharing among hunter-gatherers. In *Resource managers: North American and Australian hunter-gatherers*. N. M. Williams and E. S. Hunn (Ed.), 69-91. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Gregory, C. A. 1982. *Gifts and commodities*. London, UK: Academic Press.



- Hardin, G. 1968. The tragedy of the commons. *Science* 162:1243-48.
- Hyde, L. 1983. *The gift: Imagination and the erotic life of property*, New York, NY: Random House.
- Inglehart, R. 1981. Post-materialism in an environment of insecurity. *American Political Science Review*, 75:880-900.
- Jones, A. 1996. Philanthropy in the African American experience," in *Giving: Western ideas of philanthropy*, edited by J. B. Schweewind, 153-78. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Jonsson, P.2006. *Capturing the elusive simplifier*, Goteborg, Sweden: Center for Consumer Science.
- Khanam, F. 2003. *Life and Teachings of the Prophet Muhammad: Its relevance in a Global Context*, Goodword Books.
- Kleine, S. S. and S. M. Baker. 2004. An integrative review of material possession attachment. *Academy of Marketing Science Review*, 1:1-39.
- Kleine, S. S., R. E. Kleine III, and C. T. Allen. 1995. How is a possession 'me' or 'not me'? Characterizing types and an antecedent of material possession attachment. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22: 327-343.
- Komter, A. E. 2005. *Social solidarity and the gift*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Love, J. and T. Hubbard. 2005. Paying for public goods. In R. Ghosh, 207-29.
- Malraux, A. 1967. *Museums without walls*, edited by S. Gilbert and F. Price, Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Mauss, M. 1967. *The gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*. I. Cunnison, trans., New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- McKnight, D.2002.*From Hunting to Drinking: The Devastating Effects of Alcohol on an Australian Aboriginal Community*, London: Routledge.
- Peters, A., et al. 2004. Exposure to traffic and the onset of myocardial infarction. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 351(17):1721-30.
- Pine, J. B. II and J. H. Gilmore. 1999. *The experience economy: Work as theatre and every business a stage*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

- Price, J.A. 1975. "Sharing: The Integration of Intimate Economics," *Anthropologica*, 17 (1), 3-27.
- Sahlins, M. 1972. *Stone age economics*. Chicago: Aldine-Atherton.
- Sherry, J. F., Jr. 1993. Gift giving in anthropological perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 10: 157-168.
- Sherry, J. F., Jr., M. A. McGrath, and S. J. Levy. 1992. The disposition of the gift and many unhappy returns. *Journal of Retailing*, 38(1):40-65.
- Sieber, J. E. 1991. *Sharing social science data: Advantages and challenges*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Vaughan, G. 1997. *For-giving: A feminist critique of exchange*. Austin, TX: Plain View Press.
- Webley, P., S. L. Lea, and R. Portalska. 1983. The unacceptability of money as a gift. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 4:223-238.