



World Sharing Day celebrates collaborative consumption

People around the world are sharing access to cars, houses, skills – everything is a commodity



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Life is more about experience than ownership for devotees of collaborative consumption. Photograph: Yuriko Nakao/Reuters

Antonin Léonard hasn't had a "proper" job since April. This isn't because he lacks the relevant skills or right temperament. Quite the opposite. The 25-year-old Frenchman holds an MBA, speaks several languages and writes one of the most-read [business blogs](#) in France.

No, he doesn't have a conventional job because he's all about turning convention on its head.

Paris-based Antonin is one of a growing tribe of sharers. His present curriculum vitae includes descriptions such as "couchsurfer", "carpooler", "co-worker" and "skillsharer". Founder of the online "think tank and do tank" [OuiShare](#), he currently makes his money [giving talks and workshops](#) around Europe about the sharing economy.

Today (14 November), thousands of Antonin's fellow sharers are celebrating what business-speak calls "collaborative consumption". It's not a fad. Or, if it is, it's a big one. The market in sharing goods and services is now estimated to be worth £310bn, according to the [Global Sharing Day](#) organisers.

If that sounds exaggerated, consider some of those companies in the vanguard of the movement. [Airbnb](#), for example. An online "community marketplace" for renting private accommodation, it has generated 10m bookings in more than 26,000 cities around the world – and it's only been operating for three years.

Or there's [BlaBlaCar](#). The Europe-based service connects drivers who have empty seats with people looking for a ride; it counts more than 1.9m members in five countries. In

total, around 3.8 million people are registered for carpooling services in 5,000 cities in 45 countries.

Nor is this a fringe craze. The "shwopping" concept trumpeted by UK retailer Marks and Spencer shows how mainstream players are jumping on board. Likewise, BMW, Volkswagen, Daimler, Hertz and Peugeot are just some of the big auto brands to have embraced the idea of car-sharing.

In a planet of finite resources, collaborative consumption is very much the direction of travel, insists Benita Matofska, founder of online service aggregator The People Who Share: "Where will companies be making their money from in the future? They'll be making it from the sharing of resources because that's what we're going to have to do."

The village square, revamped

So what is collaborative consumption exactly? Rachel Botsman, author of What's Mine is Yours and a leading spokesperson for the concept, offers two versions. One is for the economists: namely, the efficient exchange of underutilised assets. The other is more down-to-earth: a revival of the old way of doing things for a smartphone generation.

"Basically, we are reinventing things that we used to do in village squares – share, barter, rent, swap – but we can do them in ways that are relevant to the Facebook age," she explains.

Those "things" include buying stuff. The classic example is enterprises such as Zipcar and Whipcar. Instead of paying up-front to purchase their own car, people are tapping into online networks that enable them to rent or share a car as and when they need one.

Where the sharing economy is really taking off, however, is in the exchange of "intangible assets", such as skills, spaces, time and money, says Botsman: "These are the fastest-growing segments because they are the easiest to make liquid and to share."

Her website, CollaborativeConsumption.com, has more than 4,000 examples of start-ups (and not-so-start-ups) operating in this space. One of the boom sectors is peer-to-peer finance. Zopa, a leading player in this new field, now boasts more than 2% of the UK retail lending market. Together with the likes of Funding Circle and RateSetter, so-called p2p lending in the UK is responsible for more than £250m in loans to date.

Transport, travel and insurance are the other significant sharing sectors so far, but the movement's advocates see little reason why the idea won't keep spreading. Take the arts sector. Film-makers, designers, architects and the like are now turning to crowd-funding services such as Kickstarter and Spacehive to identify funders and get their projects off the ground.

"This [crowd-funding] model is very different from a single brand or company decoding what 'the market' will or should get," insists Lisa Gansky, founder of Mesh, an online directory of sharing companies. "The approach is also far less wasteful than the 'buy it because we said so' marketing strategy."

Getting to know the Joneses

The reasons behind the stratospheric growth of the sharing economy are multiple. Technology plays a massive part. Web-enabled computers and phones are facilitating unparalleled levels of inter-connectivity. In our age of gizmos and apps, it's no longer fantastical to do your shopping or book your holiday on the bus. It's the new norm.

"The fact people live their lives increasingly through their telephone is vital," says Mark Walker, general manager of Zipcar UK. "We've been able to create a consumer model that is so easy to use, and [that is] on the consumers' terms, that it becomes very compelling."

Social attitudes are changing, too. Ownership is no longer the be-all-and-end-all it once

was, Walker insists. The days of defining yourself by the flash car in your driveway are on the wane. In an age of Facebook and global travel, the quality of your experiences is fast becoming the new currency of status and personality. As Walker puts it: "It's experience that people feel most valuable now. Mobility is important because it makes experiences happen, and the ownership of a car is secondary in that."

Botsman concurs. Sharing taps into the zeitgeist. It's young people, the "digital natives", who are the foot-soldiers of the movement. "They are growing up in a culture that is all about access to things versus owning them. Now those behaviours are beginning to translate into other areas of their lives. It's not that they have to learn or unlearn them. It's second nature."

She's anxious to point out that collaborative consumption isn't just a youth phenomenon. Older folk may take longer to familiarise themselves with this new economy, but they are hugely active once they get going. Airbnb, for instance, have more over-55s than under-25s. Job-sharing service [TaskRabbit](#) has a similar demographic; around one in four of its members are over 65.

The popularity of sharing suggests something deeper could be going on within society as a whole. Botsman certainly thinks so; she talks of a shift from a "me culture" to a "we culture". The "social self" is on the rise; the side of us that hungers for community and connection.

"This is one of the first generations that is really questioning whether big fences make good neighbours. Are we really happy when we keep up with the Joneses, or should we get to know the Joneses?" she asks.

Kicking the spending habit

The sharing economy is an idea whose time is arguably at hand. It's not quite there yet; the key piece that is missing is consumer awareness.

"People need to know where to go to find these businesses, and they need to know that they even exist," concedes Benita Matofska of The People Who Share. Hence, Global Sharing Day.

It's not just awareness, though. There's the stigma, too. For some, sharing still feels a little too close to "hand-me-down". Such prejudices are understandable. As Botsman observes: "The consumer engine has spent billions of dollars training us to believe that we should buy these things and that these assets are the highest values that we can have." Unpacking this messaging will inevitably take time.

Even though consumers may still need some convincing, the strategy rooms of mainstream business have long been buzzing with talk of collaborative consumption. As with all disruptive ideas, the idea has its threats and its opportunities. Fashion brands that rely on consumers restocking their wardrobes every few months may well have reason to worry, for instance. Brands like [Patagonia](#) that are pushing a re-use message, meanwhile, could find new markets opening.

Ultimately, however, collaboration has a built-in business logic. At least, so says Matofska: "Once you create a sharing culture within a business, it becomes so much more efficient; silos are inefficient and people not communicating their knowledge and information is totally inefficient." Sharing assets between businesses makes bottom-line sense too, as [WARPi](#) is fast proving.

At its most basic, sharing comes down to "smarter living", Matofska insists: "It's about making the world work better. People are saving and making money through sharing. Businesses have every reason to be doing so too."

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