



Share and share alike

Why socio-economist Rachel Botsman wants to come into your house and plant stuff in your garden.

ere are some things that Rachel Botsman has done recently. Lent money to a total stranger. Stayed in the homes of people she'd never previously met. Bought an item, sight unseen, from someone whose name she didn't know. As recently as twenty years ago, such behaviour would have been generally regarded as somewhere between gullible and certifiable. That, however, was before most people understood what the initials "www" stood for. Botsman's book, *What's Mine Is Yours: The Rise Of Collaborative*

Consumption, demonstrates not only that such leaps of trust are now normal, but that we're going to be doing more of them.

"I had to buy a presentation clicker the other day," she says. "And the person I was buying it from was called Haunted Pirate. I had one of those moments, you know – thinking that this is crazy, that I would buy something from someone called Haunted Pirate and expect to get it. I don't like where eBay has gone recently, but they showed how trust could be built online. That's my whole premise – that because of that dynamic, coupled with new technology, really old market behaviours, like swapping and trading and bartering, are coming back."

What's Mine Is Yours, co-written with American entrepreneur Roo Rogers, proposes a number of fascinating ironies: that new technology is reviving ancient business practises, that virtual communities are fostering real ones ("People using the internet to get off the internet," as she puts it),

that increasing access to borrowed/rented/used goods is withering consumerism.

"I tested every single idea," she says, "and tried to live it." On her current book tour, she has relied for accommodation on Airbnb, a website through which people can rent out spare rooms. Aside from food and everyday necessities, she didn't buy anything for a year. She lent her own money on Zopa, a peer-to-peer finance site. She insists that none of this, in the current context, was a big deal. "It's not about transforming your whole life," she says. "It's actually about self-interest, and working out what works for you."

The world that Botsman proposes is attractive – people sharing their cars on Whipcar, their gardens on Landshare, shedding their pointless clutter, and working for the common good. The problem, as despairing entertainment executives and manufacturers might weepingly note, is that it's hard for anyone to make a living like this, isn't it?



"CAN I BORROW YOUR FERRARI?"

FIVE SITES TO MAKE THE MOST OF WHAT YOU OWN

- AIRBNB**
Either a marketplace for your spare room – or an alternative to expensive hotels. From private rooms, apartments and holiday homes to castles and even treehouses around the world, users can book using secure online transactions and submit user reviews. Subtitled "Travel like a human".
- WHIPCAR**
British venture which "pairs sensible drivers with spare car time". Both owner

- and car-less drivers are pre-vetted, and are covered under Whipcar's innovative insurance scheme in case the wheels fall off, or it's accidentally used in a bank job. "It protects both sides," says co-founder Tom Wright.
- LANDSHARE**
Bringing together "people who have a passion for home-grown food", Landshare connects those who have land to share with those who need land for

- cultivating food. And city-dwellers have grabbed the opportunity with both green-fingered hands: since its launch in 2009, it now boasts more than 55,000 growers, sharers and helpers.
- ZIMRIDE**
One of several US car-pooling sites, Palo Alto-based Zimride uses Facebook and route-matching algorithms to unite drivers with empty car seats and rain-soaked pedestrians. Charging corporate clients such as

- Walmart and several US colleges up to \$10,000 for the service, the six-employee company expects revenue of \$400,000 this year.
- ZOPA**
Morbid dislike of banks? Avoid them entirely with this peer-to-peer lending site which offers a "smarter, fairer and more human way of doing money." Although they later say it's "like borrowing and lending with your friends and family." Uh-oh.

"It's a culture of dematerialisation," she says. "There's a whole generation growing up who don't necessarily want the stuff, but the benefits that it fulfils. It takes time to figure out the business models, but you can make money – it just becomes a service model. We've seen a business the size of IBM move from being a hardware computer company to providing business services. In the future, designers of all kinds will think more about how products will be shared. I think it's really exciting."

Those who fret about the gathering impact of the internet on our lives tend to do so on the grounds that it is reducing humanity to a species of lonely shut-ins gawping at screens. Botsman, however, sees the opposite: a renewed desire for communal purpose.

"There's 90 million people playing Farmville," she notes. "That's more than one percent of the world's population growing virtual crops that nobody can actually eat. What interests me is how you apply the same thinking to get people engaged in society."