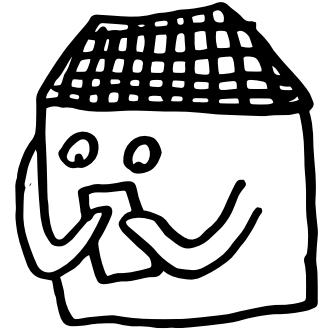# ONLINE SHARING, OFFLINE CARING?

Minouche Besters

In recent years we've seen a surge of local social sharing platforms that enable ordinary people to share talents and possessions. Examples of these in the Netherlands include: thuisafgehaald.nl (food sharing), snappcar.nl (privately owned automobile sharing), peerby.com (personal items sharing) and NLvoorelkaar.nl (time sharing: helping each other). Meanwhile, in other European countries similar platforms have also developed.

These platforms function nationwide or even internationally (for instance: Peery.com), but they are organised locally, and often at a reasonable travel distance. They tend to create closeness and transparency within the demand and supply cycle, which is important in our increasingly transient society where we need each other more and more. Research undertook in 2016 by myself and Sander Van der Ham looked at this phenomenon in greater detail. In the article I will share some of the findings.[1]

Platforms like Airbnb, UBER and others of their kind are progressively seen as the source of many problems in our cities today – increasing housing prices, false competition and sharpening divisions between the Haves and the Have Nots, like is also addressed in other articles in this book.

So what do we make of it all? In this article I will focus on the impact of online sharing on people, and how it influences feelings of inclusion, belonging and social cohesion.

HOW TO DEFINE ONLINE SHARING?

People have been sharing services and items since forever. While in the past this usually took place between people who knew each other, the online sharing platforms of today provide the opportunity to also share with strangers. Reviews, ratings and the protocols on the platforms all work to provide a sense of trust. The word sharing implies that no money is involved. Yet, in the current debate all sorts of platforms, be they on-demand paid services, house or car renting, or non-monetary item or service exchange, all fall under the umbrella of the sharing economy. A distinction can be made between platforms for profit, looking to create shareholder value, and the non or semi-commercial platforms whose main goal is to provide societal value. The lack of clear boundaries complicates the possibility of a proper discussion, but it is also a symptom of a new sector in the making. In this article, I focus on platforms that enable people to share their own underused stuff, their houses or their time; what Frenken et al (2015) call "consumers granting each other temporary access to underutilised physical assets (idle capacity), possibly for money."[2]

Thuisafgehaald.nl: makes it possible to share food with your neighbours in case you live alone and like to cook, or cook for a family and do not mind to make some extra food for others, or if you really like to bake bread or Thais. The food is collected at the cook's home, and a small fee is paid to cover expenses.

"Even after more than 50 collected meals, I still think it is special to walk into someone's kitchen and have a chat, when they fix my dinner. It is remarkable how hospitable and trustfull people are."

A user of thuisafgehaald.nl

On a greater scale the sharing economy was welcomed as a way of living more sustainably. Sharing instead of buying equals less stuff. It also increases social contacts between people who did not know each other previously.

The jury is still out on the first assumption. What if the earnings made through sharing end up stimulating new consumption? And does cheap accommodation actually fuel more travel? The only real good case seems to be that of car sharing. For instance, in its five years of existence SnappCar helped avoid 47 500 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions.[3] Other research showed that people who use a carsharing platform drive less kilometers per year and are less likely to buy a second car.[4]

The assumption around social contacts is more promising. In our research we learned a lot about why people lend their stuff to others, cook freely for neighbours they did not know, and volunteer their time to help strangers. We also heard back from the people on the receiving end of the sharing platforms: why they used them and what it did for them. As it turns out, sharing platforms:

- Help people grow weak ties: informal casual contacts that have proven to be very effective in finding a new job or a house for example;

- Provide people with the necessary assistance: for elderly men living alone the opportunity of having a home-cooked meal with a short social talk was important. For elderly women having someone to go to the supermarket with, or someone to help out at home and have a brief conversation with was a real lifesaver. With the European welfare states in decline, these platforms can fulfill a direct need.

- Show people their talents and offer opportunities to develop new skills: cooking for neighbours requires – next to passion for food – also structured preparation, sales and price management, kitchen organisation and social skills. Same goes for someone volunteering to assist an elderly lady: good listening, setting boundaries and empathy are amongst the key skills people reportedly acquire while on the job;

- Make people feel valued and needed: whether you lend out a disco lamp for a birthday party, prepare a warm meal for someone or help them in the garden, you matter. Even if you do not know many people in the city, if you are retired, or you do not own a lot of stuff, sharing platforms vividly illustrate that you can still be of value to someone.

The individual benefits of sharing platforms often spill over to the entire neighbourhood. Most platform users greet other people they've met

through the apps when they see them on the street. A smaller yet sizable group stops for a short talk and some people even arrange to meet up. Almost a quarter of platform users improve their perspective on their neighbours.

These results are important when we are seeking alternative ways to create resilient neighbourhoods. Sharing platforms facilitate participation between neighbours and face-to-face contact in a way that is still compatible with individualistic big city life. The platforms can be equally instrumental in filling the gaps that our welfare states have created over the years since the crisis. Not as a solution, but as a support system.

"I came to realise it is not necessary at all to rush to the shop and buy stuff. Lending is easy and saves a lot of money."

A user of Peerby.com

EQUAL SHARING FOR ALL?

HAPPY FEW
In our research we noticed that a very small number of non-Dutch nationals (expats, migrants) and non-white people (Suriname, Indonesian, Turkish, Moroccan and other Dutch nationals) were using the platforms. Through a limited postal code review we figured out that usage was more or less confined to the richer, whiter parts of town. This is rather frustrating when research results clearly indicate there is much to be gained by all people using the platforms; especially for people with limited social networks and little money to spend.

RACISM
Similarly, "the peer-to-peer nature of sharing economy transactions may also increase peer-to-peer discrimination".[5] Airbnb specifically has had a great number of complaints and even lawsuits related to racism. Research shows that guests with African-Americans names are 16% less likely to be accepted as Airbnb guests, in comparison with guests with recognizable white names. Also, African-American hosts earn 12% less on bookings than white Americans.[6] It would be useful to understand if the same applies to Turkish, Moroccan, and Suriname minorities here in Europe. Additionally, the research could not distinguish clearly if it was blatant racism or the lower socioeconomic status associated with the racial background that created these discrepancies. In any case, it is evident that the opportunities on the Airbnb sharing platform are not equal. Airbnb has responded to the issue by allying with NAACP to actively promote inclusivity, also within its own workforce, and better target communities who could benefit greatly from the additional income associated with home-sharing.[7]

5. K. Frenken, J. Schor / Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions 23 (2017) 3–10

6. Edelman, Benjamin, Michael Luca, and Dan Svirsky. 2017. "Racial Discrimination in the Sharing Economy: Evidence from a Field Experiment." American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, 9 (2): 1–22.

7. Airbnb teams up with the NAACP to fight racism on its platform, The Verge, Nick Statt 26 july 2017

LOWER SOCIAL CLASSES ARE DISADVANTAGED

Making extra money through cooking for neighbours, renting out your car or house has financial consequences for someone's social welfare support. It is also prohibited by social housing corporations. Thus, people in the welfare system have limited or no opportunity to participate in the sharing economy except for being on the receiving end of it. The Haves are gaining more from the sharing economy than the Have Nots. Governments and housing corporations should look into this issue and see if they can bend the rules for these platforms. Some Dutch housing corporations for instance do allow people to rent out or exchange their houses for a limited amount of days.

SOCIAL SKILLS AND CULTURAL NORMS

Navigating online platforms, making appointments, receiving people at your door all requires some solid social skills. Through conversations with welfare professionals we learned that although opportunities for their clients, or for the people in the neighborhood they worked in, did exist, people often worried about their 'social cleverness'. These professionals brought in a very valid point about women opening the door to men, when the latter come to pick something they've lent through the platform. It might be that certain cultural norms prohibit women from doing so, but sometimes there is also a big safety concern. This prompted a number of Dutch welfare organisations to assume the role of a mediator. After their involvement, for instance, the home cooking and dinner collection was all done at a shared community center. Experiments like these help us understand what is needed to support the more vulnerable groups in society and how to organise the sharing process better.
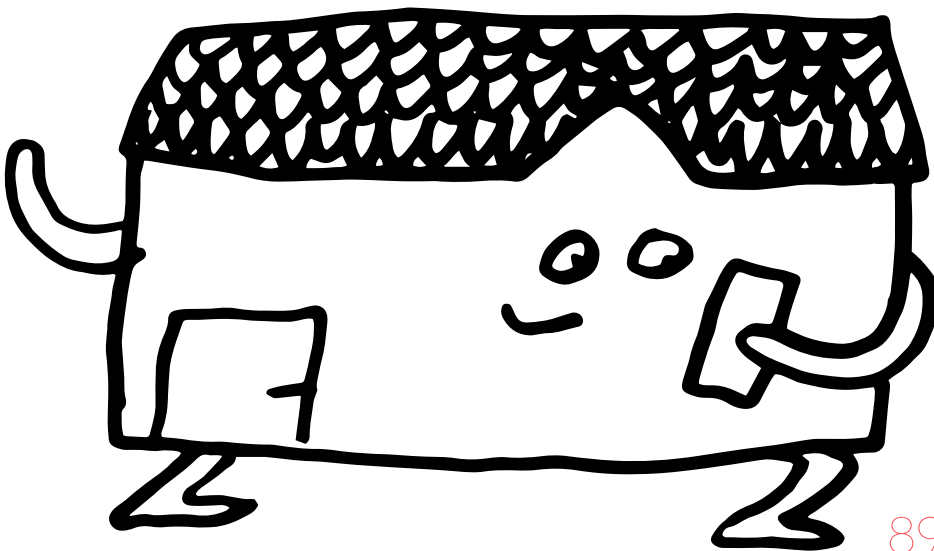
ACCESS TO THE INTERNET

Online platforms naturally require access to the internet via computers, tablets or smartphones. Depending on the country, this prerequisite may prove tricky. The Netherlands for instance has one of the highest rates of internet uptake in Europe. Even for the older age groups or people from lower socioeconomic classes internet access is a given. In our research, the users of the NLvoorelkaar.nl platform were typically the oldest, yet data showed they had no trouble in accessing the online tools. However, for countries where access to internet is still limited, the online aspect of sharing platforms might become an obstacle.

LABOUR RIGHTS

Platforms like Uber which enable people to organise their work hours are often seen as part of the sharing economy. It is beyond the purpose of this article to discuss these platforms here. Nonetheless, it is important to mention that if we were to make people's time subject to the algorithms of online platforms, we risk dehumanising their labour. Yes, the freedom of planning your own hours can be liberating; think of students or perhaps also parents, working around school hours. Unfortunately, it is often the low paying jobs with few or no skills required that are organised this way. The workers are easily replaceable and have little opportunity to organise themselves properly. With no front man to talk to, no floor manager to understand your personal situation, no colleagues who stick together and get each other coffee, it can become pretty cold and lonely looking at the app for your next ride.

NLvoorelkaar.nl: matches people who are in need of support with volunteers in the neighbourhood. It can be for a one time question, but often people connect for longer periods to help out with the weekly trip to the supermarket or by keeping someone company on a regular basis. No money is involved.

"*Someone in my neighbourhood needed help with sorting out boxes after moving here. I was happy that I could help him out and it made me also feel better about myself.*"

A user of NLvoorelkaar.nl
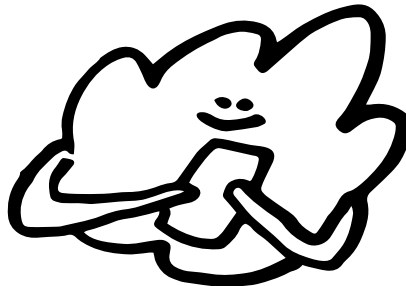
The debate surrounding online sharing platforms is greatly complicated by the discussions circling Uber, Airbnb and other commercial sharing platforms as well as the enormous variety in setups (from nonprofits, social entreprises to commercial companies with international shareholders) and purposes (as sharing could imply both monetary and non-monetary transactions).

Although the discussions on labour rights and the impact of tourists on our inner cities are important, they can also take away attention from the real benefits of the online sharing platforms, namely:

- Providing assistance to people when they grow older, connecting them to neighbours who can cook a nice meal for them, mow the lawn or simply offer a friendly chat;

- Shedding light on unknown talents and skills, allowing people to develop themselves further and to be of value to each other;

- Taking a safe step towards entrepreneurship, exploring for instance what it means to have dinner ready on time at a fair cost for your neighbourhood 'customers';

- Growing confidence and self-esteem through the social contacts, the feedback loops and the knowledge that you actually have something to offer to someone else.

But before all people can truly benefit from these social platforms, local governments, welfare organisations and placemakers alike must recognize and address the negative externalities which end up excluding large groups of people from participating in the sharing economy. Technology is merely a tool that helps us do things more efficiently: connect, organise, match, pay, administrate. But if we leave out the human interaction aspect, or have no eye for the human scale, it all becomes soulless. So let's make online social sharing platforms truly social together!