

Article

# Decoding the Language of the Machine

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economy' concept involves no true sharing (

economic principles, they are constructed to promote certain patterns of behavior. Thus, market outcomes depend not merely on whether participants are convinced that obeying the 'rules of the game' is to their advantage (Garcia-Parpet, 2008 p. 46), but also whether doing so is deemed morally acceptable. For example, MacKenzie and Millo (2003) found that a market for financial instruments, created with appeals to rationality, faced limits as traders were concerned about being perceived as 'shit-sellers'. Abolola (1996) found that a similar effort succeeded when investment banks created an environment with 'minimal interdependence, extraordinary incentives for self-interest and limited constraints on behavior' (p. 37).

Scholars have also shown how markets are shaped by the everyday morality of their participants. In the case of organ transfers, only non-market exchange in the form of a donation



within the neoliberal paradigm. However, they also see their actions within the sharing economy as moral projects that can yield non-neoliberal outcomes such as social connection, autonomy and domestic forms of production.

### 3. Methods and data

The existing literature on the sharing economy suggests that differences among initiatives produce different types of economic practices. Among peer sharing platform typologies include the for-profit platform/non-profit divide (Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015) and the monetized v. 'pure sharing' distinction (Belk, 2014). Given that different economic practices rely upon and reinforce different moral judgments and justifications, we expect that the moral logics employed by participants will vary across these different types of sharing (Fourcade and Healy, 2007). As a result, to explore the role of moral logics in market construction we chose to sample peer-to-peer cases across these typological distinctions. We interviewed and surveyed 120 active users and providers on five platforms, the majority of whom are located in a Northeastern city in the USA. These disparate research sites allow us to separate the various moral meanings people make of their sharing economy participation from the specific platform (for-profit versus non-profit) or service (monetized versus non-monetized). We ask to what extent, if any, do sharing economy participants invoke a collective moral imaginary? Despite sampling for variation, the fact that these initiatives all involved work that either took place in or extended out from the home proved central to structuring the moral logics of participants. Across our sample, participants drew on frames from the domestic sphere to justify their participation in the sharing economy, and to distinguish their work from other economic arrangements.

We wanted our sample to reflect the population of sharing economy providers and workers. However, when we began data collection in 2011, there was little detailed information on the composition of this group. We did know that young adults were the early adopters and innovators of the sharing economy, as well as its most active participants (Lessa, 2015).



We find that most of our respondents draw on the pervasive framing of the domestic sphere as one of genuine intimacy and social connection uncontaminated by the market (Zelizer 2010). They assert that more ‘homey’ relationships are a moral good that lead to greater social connection. In the following sections, we will also outline the range of meanings that social connections took on in various settings. Providers on TaskRabbit and Airbnb feel that bringing economic production into the home results in personalized exchange: that is, social connection results from individual economic activities. Participants in the Food swap, the makerspace, and some open learners imagine that their exchanges foster social connection on a community level—they want to labor, learn and create with likeminded others.

The relationship between the domestic imaginary and agency also varies between the monetized and the DIY sites. Taskers and Airbnb hosts want to take control of their work lives. Taskers appreciate that they can turn off the app when they have other priorities, while Airbnb hosts literally use their homes as sources of income to do things they otherwise would not be able to. Some of these participants even hope to work less through their involvement and articulate the moral value of autonomy—freedom—more than just exhib-  
-ity. For open learners, food swappers and makers the homey environments of production and exchange enable creativity; they want an economy in which they can build on their inventiveness, and produce meaningful goods.

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able to help people', especially because 'ninety percent' of them are female business owners. 'It's amazing to have all these, like, strong, amazing people around you. And I love that aspect of it, and that there's the connections that I've made through it.' Jacqui has developed long-term relationships with two clients.

**Airbnb: The Great Host**

Twenty-seven-year-old Peter, white, is a seasoned Airbnb host. He says that social connections are a big part of the hosting experience. '[Y]ou get to meet a lot of really cool people ... they're more open-minded—like, they like to travel, they like to talk, they like social y're.1(seae(ppen-minded—(T6.4(h4ol)-onships)-4(h4ose)tweenndedter.)-326(hos4.)-326-4(hnd)-250.2(

Naomi, a white 32-year-old who attended alternative schools in her childhood and is in the midst of a PhD program, is committed to learning that is decentralized and socially connected.

[T]here's really no competition, it's more, like, this cool sense of community or brotherhood between, you know, developers and the programmers and the people in startup world that you don't really see.

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Anne, a 28-year-old white woman working as a freelance writer, finds a sense of community in the food swap she co-founded, proudly remarking that she, a self-proclaimed 'city girl', got to 'know a farmer': '[The food swap] builds community around food ... urban people who might otherwise, you know, sort of, not know each other ... We're bringing them together around food.' The yearning for community is also evident when a platform fails to deliver it. One food-swapper was disheartened by the fact that our interview with her was the first time she met someone from the swap outside of the monthly gathering.

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People at Makerspace preferred not to work on their projects in the isolation of their apartments, garages or basements, and sought out the presence of other makers, to 'do-it-together' (Busch, 2012). Jen, a white woman in her late 20s and an original founder of the makerspace, described this desire as a fundamental human need:

Interacting and making tangible things actually has social and cognitive impacts on human beings that are really important. The absence of those from our lives is having [adverse] affects on our society ... One part of the human experience is enabling that, whether somebody wants to interact with it just as a hobby ... or as their main mode of expression and work. And then doing it in a collaborative environment.

Jen took this humanizing mission seriously and devoted what seemed to be all of her waking life to managing the space. For her, community and collaboration were not side benefits of Makerspace, but a defining premise of the organization.

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The sharing economy offers people novel means of exercising control over their labor, finances and creativity. Participants denounce jobs that are rote, inflexible and unfulfilling. Even with the weak economic recovery, informants did not speak nostalgically of bureaucratic or corporate life, the traditional bases of a stable, middle-class existence. In our conversations, they vividly enacted the corporate critique that has saturated pop culture for decades (Saval, 2014).

**4.2.1 F l , y t y ā** **t l (ā ā t R ā t , A t t ,** **l ā , 8)**

Our informants want to avoid employment where supervisors manage their time and the job consumes most of their day. Taskers wanted flexible work that allowed them to follow their own priorities. With TaskRabbit, they could set their own hours and generally choose tasks that interested them. Meanwhile, Airbnb providers appreciated that renting on the platform



advancement. A mentor offered an entry-level role at a startup company, and encouraged him to use open learning resources to figure out what he could do next. Unlike at his corporate job, he was encouraged to present his ideas to his supervisors and was given opportunities to use the skills he had acquired from his self-study efforts: 'I sent around my notes from this UX [user experience] thing', and the CEO is, like, 'Cool, you know, if that's interesting to you, like, we'll try to get you on some discussions and stuff.' Through open learning, Mike attained enough confidence and skills to take advantage of the opportunities presented in a new and more autonomous job. Learning became the means to work towards a more self-determined work situation.

I'm doing it 'cause I want to make myself potentially more valuable... so that I can have a job that I like, and that I have flexibility, and that maybe I can work for myself and just do, like, be a contractor.

Derek, a white open learner in his 20s, also desires control, which he attributes to his entrepreneurial mother. His mother was fired when her company took a hit during the 2008 financial crisis, and lacking a majority stake in the company, there was little she could do to prevent it. Derek reasoned that if he could learn all aspects of running a company, then he would be valuable enough to keep a larger stake in his own venture and avoid his mother's misfortune. Open learning allowed him to achieve a more autonomous work life through entrepreneurship.

#### 4.2.2 I want to be in control (makers, food swappers, open learners)

Makers, food swappers and open learners want to regain some sense of control in domains that have been outsourced to professionals and thus estranged from their lives, such as food production and education. They want an economy that doesn't impede creative work, but lets them innovate and create products, projects, and ideas that they find meaningful. Many of our respondents see autonomy in work as enabling creative and artistic labor, which they found difficult to realize in workplaces and classrooms that value docility over creativity and exploration. A few respondents on TaskRabbit and Airbnb enjoy the creative aspects of their platform work, such as creating music videos for children, and apartment decoration, but such accounts are rare for participants in the two for-profit platforms. For the food swappers, open learners and makers, on the other hand, creative freedom is paramount.

#### Open learners joyfully describe how they produce their own software or websites and more grandly, companies.

Naomi and other open learners joyfully describe how they produce their own software or websites and more grandly, companies. These skills give them more than the flexibility to find work they are passionate about: they see opportunities to make work they are passionate about.

When people start to see more peer to peer transactions around everything [there's] creativity, service creation, contact creation that people can exchange in more ways than they used to be able to and then sort of discover new ways... So, if you happen to be interested in glow in the dark yo-yos made from special imported wood from I don't know where. Maybe that's your thing. And maybe you can really go and learn about the wood and learn about glow in the dark paint materials and become an expert in that and teach somebody else and maybe make a bit of

money . . . and then start selling your yo-yos to your neighbors down the street. All of that, that whole hierarchy that whole stack of learning and creating and economics didn't used to be possible.

To Naomi, open learning presents people with a newfound opportunity to create and innovate.

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People are drawn to the swaps to explore, experiment and emulate the taste, texture and smell of meals that are crafted from scratch. Rachel, who is white and 32 years old, feels alienated from the work and production that characterizes so much of our lives, including food, and was drawn to the food swap as an alternative to the global food system and its 'insanity'. Her swapping is motivated by a desire for delicious food, made by people rather than corporations. In the way dull, corporate labor alienates working people from the services they provide and the products they build, processed and plastic-packed strawberries alienate people from the pleasures of fresh, locally sourced and savory food. Twenty-eight-year-old Anne also sees learning as a vehicle for autonomy. For her, food trading is educational and empowering, and like open learners who acquire skills that give them choices, learning to make food from produce she has grown helps her avoid the processed supermarket stuff she denounces.

It's been educational for me, because I didn't really grow up in a family that cared about that stuff . . . So it's kind of interesting for me to discover this older, like, world of food.

Thirty-one-year-old Lidia, a white woman from France who came to the USA for graduate studies, joined the food swap because she longed to do something creative and tangible with her hands: 'I just really wanted to be able to do something where I could see the results of all of my efforts – something with a material outcome.' She marveled at the ingredients Americans tolerated in their processed food. 'Why would anyone ever even think to put animal bones [in the form of gelatin] in yogurt? It's yogurt.' Lidia made exotic jams and jellies—plums blended with vermouth, black apricots transformed into preserves, and even cantaloupes turned into a spreadable topping for yogurt or toast. As her storage space lled up she started food swapping, to try new recipes and imagine new things.

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Hobbyist makers often bustle between projects they have crammed into their scarce off-hours, while makers-in-residence leisurely craft, socialize and experiment. Jen, who was at the helm of the makerspace when we talked, described her transition from a Manhattan upbringing and Ivy League education:

Society has just built up these fairly artificial and arbitrary hoops to jump through in order to be able to accomplish anything else. In this environment, because the work that I do has immediate impact to people whom I know, it is much easier to stay motivated to get work done.

In Jen's view, the goals she inherited as a consequence of her professional upbringing, while an acknowledged privilege, were also a source of alienation. She didn't want to simply assume a role, she wanted to create her own. This meant helping to build a space that would

provide her and others with the freedom to pursue their interests outside of the conventional world of work. Evan, a lively, fast-talking white man in his early 30s, has no shortage of ideas about the meaning of Makerspace as a space, and making as a pursuit. While Evan

**Table 1.** Moral of social connection, Logic, Moral of agency

Sites	Logic	Moral of social connection	Moral of agency
<p>Associated norms and practices</p>	<p>DI</p>	<p>P</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Critique of 'fake nice' exchanges and 'cold' professionalism</li> <li>Small dips into intimate settings of home and daily life</li> </ul>	<p>DI</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Critique of 9–5 of ce work</li> <li>Manage own hours and choice of jobs</li> <li>Financial control via supplemental income</li> </ul>
<p>Associated norms and practices</p>	<p>DI</p>	<p>P</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share meals and stories, even gift exchanges</li> <li>Monetized hospitality facilitates casual sociability</li> </ul>	<p>DI</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enables freedom from employment</li> <li>Reduce debt and nancial precarity</li> <li>More control over domestic space</li> </ul>
<p>Associated norms and practices</p>	<p>DI</p>	<p>H<sub>1</sub></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participatory learning environments</li> <li>Joint software coding</li> </ul>	<p>H<sub>1</sub></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self determined work situation via collaborative skill acquisition</li> <li>Autonomy through entrepreneurship</li> <li>Facilitates meaningful projects and work content</li> </ul>
<p>Associated norms and practices</p>	<p>DI</p>	<p>C</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community and collaboration de ning premise of organization</li> </ul>	<p>DI</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-directed making for personal consumption</li> <li>Craft as agency/customized fabrication.</li> <li>Freedom to reject normative life trajectories</li> </ul>
<p>Associated norms and practices</p>	<p>DI</p>	<p>C</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yeaming for community/building community around food</li> <li>Facilitating connections between households and local food system</li> </ul>	<p>DI</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Desire for creative expression in the kitchen</li> <li>Sharing food allows for experimentation—trade surplus for diverse pantry</li> <li>Local and seasonal variation/and one-of-a-kind products</li> </ul>

force in contemporary consumption (Allen, 2004; Johnston and Baumann, 2014) and, we find, in the sharing economy.

#### American, Airbnb and the home

The perceived domesticity of the sharing economy serves as a powerful social imaginary against the broader economy. Megan offers a withering critique of the contemporary economy.

I think that our politicians and corporations have sold us this bill of goods that if you just buy more stuff you'll be happy . . . In fact, it probably makes you less happy. And it wastes resources and we're destroying our environment. . . . this whole way of living . . . replaces, I think, the things that would make people care more about and invest more in the communities they have.

Dissatisfaction with dominant consumer offerings led many of our participants to, quite literally, take economic exchange into the domestic sphere. Megan describes Airbnb as 'real', providing travelers with unique, personal experiences with 'way more character' than a hotel room. Tourists sometimes venture into the 'backspaces' of their destinations in search of more authentic experiences (MacCannell, 1973), and the search for 'the real, the genuine' is sought in many other cultural domains, too (Fine, 2003). Our participants say that the sharing economy offers authentic exchanges, because the exchange is embedded in people's homes and in local communities.

#### Florida's Moral Market Order

Orlando sees the sharing economy as a sign of production and consumption coming full circle. He yearns for a time when economic life was rooted in local relationships of mutual concern.

We used to do everything for ourselves and we were very hospitable towards each other. And then we started going to corporations . . . and everyone went there. People are going back to helping each other again because it's easier. people are getting used to doing things online. So now it's, like, going back to locally, here we are – we don't need these big companies.

At the core of Orlando's vision of a moral market order is belief in the power and moral worth of people doing things for themselves and for each other, without relying on the 'big companies' at the root of the economy's moral failings. Many of our participants shared this perspective.

#### Mark Guthrie: the maker

Guthrie, a white man in his late 20s with a pastoral sensibility, describes his attraction to the makerspace as a 'yearning to make things'. He wants to repair family furniture that was damaged during a flood, build a cider press for apples he had gathered, and build furniture for friends and family:

I have a list of furniture from my girlfriend, but I'm going to exhaust that at some point in the next couple of years. . . . and then it's just a matter of, like, making stuff and just giving stuff. That's what my grandfather used to do.

Ideally, Guthrie would like to make it unnecessary for others to buy furniture on the market. Rather than taking place in the conventional retail industry, his production would



be rooted in the domestic sphere and be given as gifts. Liz, the woodworker, also invokes her home.

I use the space's equipment to make art and to express myself, but I also use this stuff to build functional things I need at my house, and to x things that are broken. . . Everyone should know



Many of our participants find fault with the moral order of corporate capitalism or impersonal consumerism, but they do not see 'markets' per se as the cause of these problems. Instead, their critiques are a mirror image of the common view that the market and the social operate in separate, hostile spheres (Lizier, 2010). They don't view 'the market' as colonizing and corrosive, rather, they construct different kinds of markets. They shift production and consumption from corporations to the personal sphere, where they believe there is greater intimacy, social connection, and self-direction. In response to the perceived failings of dominant markets, our respondents often propose alternatives that link

practices in providers' daily lives. To them, the sharing economy is an opportunity to domesticate the market, and foster morally attuned exchange.

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MacArthur Foundation, funded as part of the Connected Learning Research Network under Subaward #2011-2618.

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