

Deceptively Simple: Unpacking the Notion of “Sharing”

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Abstract

This essay approaches social media by addressing the deceptively simple notion of “sharing.” While “sharing” is central to how activities taking place on social media get discussed, the word does not necessarily help us get our analytical work about social media done. It is at risk of turning into one of those words that mean little because we try to make them mean too many things at once. While it remains relevant to address and analyze discourses surrounding the notion of “sharing,” it is important to be critical about them. Sharing is not a monolith. Sharing is diverse. Sharing serves the economic interests of big corporations. Perhaps most importantly, referring to activities as “sharing” is political and value-laden.

Keywords

sharing, social network site, sharing economy, sharing mechanism

We all know the word. It is likely that at one point or another, you have used it to talk about social media. It is equally likely that you have been driven a little crazy by how the word is tasked to capture a multitude of activities and practices. Or maybe you were frustrated by the failure of this simple, common word to live up to these high expectations. The word, of course, is “sharing.”

We use social media to connect with those we love and with those we have hardly shaken hands with. We humbly brag about our accomplishments, organize social events, and coordinate the co-use of cars and camping gear. We forage for valuable pieces of information and share some of our own specialized knowledge in return. We disclose what is on our mind, or what we are wearing, or how many miles we ran, and what music we listened to on our way. Sometimes we are just goofing around. At other times, our engagement gets intensely serious and political, or we are in it to make some money.

When we do all of this and more, we often refer to our activities as “sharing.” The deceptively simple notion of “sharing” is central to how activities taking place on social media get discussed.

In popular media and academic texts, writers both celebrate and lament the way that people share online. In its negative valence, “sharing” is often characterized as narcissistic or equated with loss of privacy. Horror stories abound of sharing leading to lost job opportunities and relationship difficulties. At the same time, social media remain wildly popular and praised for the opportunities they provide.

Sharing on social media can help us build and maintain social relationships. Delivering on the promise of social capital, engagement with and through these networked platforms can facilitate benefiting from our personal connections, too.

Among all this talk of “sharing,” the word does not necessarily help us get our analytical work about social media done. It is at risk of turning into one of those words that mean little because we try to make them mean too many things at once. While it remains relevant to address and analyze discourses surrounding the notion of “sharing,” it is important to be critical about them. It is time to be loud about the obvious observation that sharing is not a monolith. It means many different things to many different people.

Sharing is diverse. We share differently with different audiences. And sometimes, often without even noticing, we share on behalf of others, disclosing details that they might have chosen to keep to themselves or express differently. Sharing can be a carefully crafted performance in which we strive to create an illusion of effortless authenticity. As such, it can be hard work. Social media may lead us to a situation wherein the performative nature of social life becomes more visible than we would desire. Increased awareness of the work that goes into achieving smooth social interaction and

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sustaining meaningful relationships may feel uncomfortable. In some ways, social life is always a performance, but often, we would rather act as if that is not the case.

Since the early days of social media, sharing has meant posting online manually selected digital content: photos, links, short snippets of text, or audio files. More and more, sharing is also a matter of publishing automatically tracked behavioral information, ranging from logs about the songs we have played on our digital devices to intimately personal, sometimes even bodily, data about our latest fitness endeavors or sleep patterns. And if they ever were, our activities on social media are certainly no longer a sole matter of posting and browsing digital content. Increasingly, networked platforms are used to facilitate the sharing of physical spaces, goods, and other material resources, too. Now that “the sharing economy” is all the rage, those who have hopped on the bandwagon are “sharing” their resources, including their time and skills, for both social and financial benefit.

Sharing serves the economic interests of big corporations. Platform providers, ranging from Facebook to Airbnb and Uber, take part in constructing and strengthening the rhetoric of “sharing.” Social media companies, especially social network sites such as Facebook, are incentivized to encourage peer-to-peer sharing, in part because the more we share, the more data they can amass about everyday activities that used to be difficult to track. This raises serious concerns regarding how the resulting datasets can be leveraged for surveillance and control, as well as to serve platform providers’ commercial interests in ways that may be in conflict with civic values and liberties. Other actors are eager to fit under the big umbrella of “the sharing economy,” because helping people to share with their peers sounds like such a nice, benevolent

line of business. While the practices these platforms support may have little to do with what we would intuitively consider as “sharing,” framing the activities as such can lend itself to branding businesses in an attractively authentic and community-oriented way.

Perhaps most importantly, referring to social media activities as “sharing” is political and value-laden. It may undermine the action that takes place across platforms. It may make light of our mundane fun-loving socializing. More dangerously, it may belittle potent civic activism in an effort to silence it as unimportant. Social media can both entertain and empower. Both of these are crucial for the ongoing importance these tools have in our daily lives—and in the lives of those whose everyday experiences bear little resemblance to our own.

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