

Nicholas A. John, **The Age of Sharing**, Malden, MA: Polity, 2017, 224 pp., \$69.95 (hardcover), \$24.95 (paperback).

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From sharing one's feelings with friends to sharing a ride to sharing files to sharing our data with online marketers, the term "sharing" is a keyword for our times. But, as each of these examples show, the meanings of sharing vary wildly across different contexts. Arguably, booking an Uber ride is not "sharing"—it is a purchase of a service—and yet Uber, Lyft, and Airbnb have been hailed as part of a new "sharing economy." How can we refer to these activities with the same term that we would use to describe telling a secret to a friend? How could our agreement with online social networking sites, where we agree to "share" our information with advertisers in exchange for access to the service, be similar to our sharing a photo with a relative? How have all of these disparate activities come to be labeled "sharing," and what does this say about communication, media practices, and political economy?



These are the questions at the heart of Nicholas A. John's excellent book, *The Age of Sharing*. Rather than adjudicate which of all of the activities we now label as sharing activities are truly sharing practices, John takes a "pragmatic approach" (p. 6) to the question. In other words, instead of asking "What practices should we call sharing?" he asks "What practices do we call sharing?" (p. 6). John is interested in the ways in which people deploy the term "sharing" across multiple contexts and throughout recent history. This approach allows John to trace the meanings of "sharing" as they have shifted in the English language over time, from "dividing" or "splitting" (he uses the example of a ploughshare, which breaks up earth) to time sharing in computation, where multiple users would have access to cycles of computational power on a mainframe. He links these disparate meanings of sharing across key practices, including sharing economies, sharing as a form of therapy and redemption, and file sharing among peer-to-peer computers.

In his chapter on sharing economies, John notes a pattern in the marketing and promotion of sharing apps: their appeal to either childhood or prelapsarian ideals. In both cases, sharing apps help us recover something we have lost, whether it be our "natural" propensity for sharing things as children or a pre-capitalist society based on gifting rather than taking. In exploring these themes, John not only draws on the marketers of Uber or Airbnb but also on academics and journalists who have repeated and amplified these themes of loss and redemption.

As for sharing as therapy—think "sharing your feelings"—John provides a partial genealogy of contemporary social media by tracing therapeutic practices back to the Oxford Group, an early 20th-

century Christian organization in which members confessed their sins to one another. Intriguingly, much of the language developed by the Oxford Group bears a striking similarity to the discourses about being “authentic” on contemporary social media. “If ours is the age of sharing,” he writes, “it is because in ‘sharing’ converge, on the one hand, the authentic expression of self both as a means of intimate relationship construction and as a means of self-understanding, and, on the other, the mode of participation in social media” (p. 120).

John’s chapter on file sharing features close analysis of technologies, especially 1970s-era time sharing of computing cycles and more contemporary BitTorrent protocols. He connects these technical structures to specific cultural practices among file-sharing communities, including The Pirate Bay, and how its participants judged one another based on “share ratios” (ratios of uploaded versus downloaded bits of files). Within these online groups, “sharing is caring” takes on specific meanings, where imbalances in share ratios are perceived and policed in surprising ways.

Thus, overall, the analysis of the book links permutations of sharing to extraction of economic value, the deployment of feel-good language to cover up exploitation, and means for online communities to judge each other’s actions and authenticities. As someone who has written about forms of 1990s “knowledge sharing” and “knowledge management” as precursors to contemporary social media and big data practices (Gehl, 2014, 2015), I would have suggested John consider knowledge sharing or intelligence sharing (think of the post-9/11 emphasis on interagency intelligence sharing; see Regan & Monahan, 2013; Taylor & Russell, 2012) as key genealogical threads leading up to contemporary sharing economies and social networking. Both practices include decidedly managerial and organizational properties that make them distinct from sharing economy apps, confessional, or peer-to-peer forms of sharing.

However, I find John’s overall sharing model and distinctions between distributive and communicative sharing quite useful for analysis of types of sharing John does not cover, including knowledge sharing. His model, further detailed in the concluding chapter, thus could serve other scholars interested in sharing practices. Moreover, the book has broad applicability as an approach to the study of single cultural terms.

In terms of archives, *The Age of Sharing* draws on the Google Books corpus, Brigham Young University’s *Corpus of Historical American English*, and John’s own archives, including one of social networking site screenshots (culled from Archive.org) and his collection of file-sharing forum posts. (And as John notes, his analysis is limited to English and the meanings of sharing in that language; he does not suggest these meanings carry over into other languages.) John skillfully mixes these large-scale collections of instances of the use of the word “sharing” with close reading of specific texts and images. His combination of distant and close reading is a useful approach for other researchers engaged in contemporary keyword analysis.

This work sits well alongside similar Internet studies books, such as Fred Turner’s *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (2008), which traces shifts in digital cultures across decades and multiple contexts (a book John cites quite often). John’s work is also a compelling read after engagement with

collections of digital keywords, such as Ben Peters' (2016) collection of that name, because such keyword collections inevitably offer far less depth than John's focus on a single term. John's extended analysis of a single term thus offers a model for turning a keyword into a book-length study. In this manner, it also reminds me of the meditation on a single line of BASIC code found in the collectively-written book *10 PRINT CHR\$(205.5+RND(1));:GOTO 10* (Montfort et al., 2013). Like these books, *The Age of Sharing* would be useful in classes on Internet cultures, communication, and media studies.

Ultimately, John's focus on sharing as a "polysemic homonym" (p. 146) reveals a symbolic economy that traffics across the various meanings of a word, with connotations of "openness, honesty, mutuality, equality, [and] trust" (p. 147). His central diagram is a triangle linking intimate relationships, social media, and sharing economies. John demonstrates how a value, say, honesty, can be at play in each of these spheres and can link them. This economy of meanings can be deployed to buttress therapeutic practices, or more cynically deployed to justify new forms of labor exploitation and value extraction: "The broad context in which sharing became caring and associated with rainbows is also the broad context that threatens to make sharing exploitative and alienating." (p. 154). "Sharing" may not last much longer as a keyword of our time, but John's analysis will stand as a historical documentation of the peculiar mix of meanings within the term, as well as a model for future engagements with other words that capture cultural moments.

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