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The Sharing Economy in Norway: Emerging Trends and Debates

Trond Halvorsen

Department of Technology Management, SINTEF
Trondheim, Norway
Trond.Halvorsen@sintef.no

Christoph Lutz

BI Norwegian Business School
Oslo, Norway
christoph.lutz@bi.no

Johan Barstad

The University College for Green Development
Bryne, Norway
johan@hgut.no

Abstract

2019 was a year when the sharing economy and collaborative consumption was starting to make a significant impact on Norwegian society and way of life. With international hospitality and mobility services leading the way, several home-grown digital platforms also saw noticeable growth in users and income. New legislation was put in place to support an orderly transition to an economy that makes better use of idle resources. While the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has dealt a major temporary setback to this development, this chapter documents how the Norwegian economy was experiencing rapid change that may soon return.

Keywords: Norway, Sharing Economy, Micro-Mobility, REKO, Airbnb, Voi, Tise

Introduction

The Norwegian government is generally welcoming to the sharing economy and the benefits it is expected to bring in terms of economic efficiency and environmental

impact. While there are some concerns about the sustainability of some of the new business models, the dominating view is that Norway should embrace innovation, especially innovations that support a circular and greener economy and that create new sources of income. A 2017 special committee on the sharing economy identified the need to adjust the regulatory frameworks, in particular, to clarify what legislation is valid in each new circumstance (Regjeringen 2017). This was partly followed up in 2019 with new legislation deregulating the taxi industry and short-term rental of private homes.

Below, we summarise some of the key developments in the sharing economy in Norway during 2019. Most references are Norwegian research reports (some with an English summary). This indicates that the research on this topic is still emerging, just as the industry itself. Our intention is to guide new researchers to the existing literature and provide an international audience with an update on key developments in the Norwegian sharing economy in 2019.

Definition

The sharing economy is defined in a Norwegian Official Report (Regjeringen 2017: 3) as “economic activity enabled or facilitated via digital platforms that coordinate the provision of a service or the exchange of services, skills, assets, property, resources, or capital without transferring ownership and primarily between private individuals.”

Attempting to map the sharing economy in Norway, Fafo (a research institute associated with the largest Norwegian labour union) provides a definition based upon three key features that characterise the sharing economy (Jesnes et al. 2016: 7):

- 1) An intermediary in the form of a digital platform.
- 2) Which helps to connect complementary players, which can be considered as providers and customers.
- 3) Who exchange a set of benefits from the provider to the customer. There can be a wide variety of benefits, from services and asset/property sharing to capital, expertise, and labour.

Further, some official definitions are in use, but they are less precise. For example, do the Norwegian tax authorities (Skatteetaten, n.d.) define the sharing economy as “a business model where private individuals sell services or rent out assets directly or through intermediary companies.” Whether an activity is taxable depends on the type of sharing economy the subject is involved in. The definition found in the largest Norwegian dictionary (Store Norske Leksikon 2018) states that: “Sharing economy is a business model where private people and companies buy, exchange and offer services or assets in cooperation with each other through a digital platform.” Further, the definitions of the “sharing economy” often involve discussions of alternative terms, such as “platform economy” and “dissemination economy” (Norwegian: *formidlingsøkonomi*).

The definitions mentioned above have all been translated from Norwegian by the authors.

Key Questions

The sharing economy is a relatively new phenomenon, being applied in various forms in different markets. Understandably, research on the impact of the sharing economy has focused on questions related to the markets where we find the broadest uptake and most widespread use. Often markets are dominated by international companies who expanded into Norway only after testing out technologies and business models in other countries. This means that they have mature technological platforms and sound financial backing, making them credible disruptors upon arrival.

Previous research has focused on consumers rights (Pettersen et al. 2016), labour market relations (Dølvik and Jesnes 2017; Jesnes et al. 2016), and the impact of Airbnb on local housing markets (Vinogradov and Strømme-Bakhtiar 2017). Recently, researchers at Telemarkforskning (a research institute) have looked at food distribution directly from farmers to consumers through Facebook groups called REKO networks (Leikvoll et al. 2020). Early 2020 we had some 80 networks distributed throughout Norway, primarily in urban, more densely populated areas.

An international Horizon 2020 research project led by consortium partners in Norway explored the sharing economy in Norway from a comparative perspective. This project yielded insights on participation, privacy, and power in the European sharing economy based on a twelve-country survey (Andreotti et al. 2017; Ranzini et al. 2017a; Newlands et al. 2017) and eighteen focus groups (Ranzini et al. 2017b). Participation rates in Norway were similar to the average across all countries considered in the survey: 26% of the respondents in Norway indicated they had used sharing economy platforms at least once, while the average across all countries was 28% (Andreotti et al. 2017). On some issues, however, the findings showed a North-South divide, with Norwegian and Danish users (the two Nordic countries included in the survey) being more sceptical and critical towards both platforms and peers than their Southern European counterparts (Newlands et al. 2017).

With the increased use of Airbnb over the recent years, taxation and regulation of short-term rentals (defined as rental periods of 30 days or less) arose as an issue. This was addressed through legislative action, in effect from April 2nd, 2019. According to the amendment, apartments in housing cooperatives may now be rented out for a total of 90 days per year, while previously not at all. Further, the law made it illegal to own more than one unit in each housing cooperative. The law intends to balance the interests of those who wish to rent out their private home against other residents.

Examples

The recent trend in Norway has seen the establishment of new platforms by both start-ups and traditional companies. Some of these were inspired by non-profit motifs, such as empowerment, increased social inclusion or positive environmental impact. Others were seeking to capitalize on consumers more open to sharing and online shopping than only a few years ago (Pedersen et al. 2016). Below we list some initiatives to illustrate how Norwegian entrepreneurs have been positioning themselves for the future of sharing.

Nabohjelp (Neighbour help)

Nabohjelp is an app for collaborative sharing in a neighbourhood context. It was developed by Norway's largest housing cooperative, Obos. The Nabohjelp app was developed as a tool for creating better homes for Obos members, but it is openly available for all Android and iPhone users. Since Nabohjelp was introduced in 2017, it has grown by 50,000 users yearly. The app lets users post both requests and offers for help through messages viewable only to those living in the same area as the user. No ranking mechanisms to indicate the quality of the interactions exists. Instead, Nabohjelp relies on the social capital existing in a neighbourhood. One of the functions lets a user see other local users (as well as how distant they are from your home), so you can know which of your neighbours have installed the app on their phone.

FINN (Find)

The online marketplace FINN is an interesting example, given its importance in the Norwegian market and its local nature. According to Wikipedia (2019), the website was established in March 2000. This is the largest Norwegian website based on the number of page views, has around 3.5 million users a week according to survey bureau TNS Gallup and currently over 400 employees. FINN has a section called "Finn småjobber" (Finn minor jobs), comparable to US-based services such as TaskRabbit, Upwork, and HelloAlfred. Finn.no belongs to Schibsted, an international media group that is a dominant player in the classifieds market.

Mobilitetsprosjektet (The Mobility Project)

Halden Municipality was the first in Norway to establish a car (and bike) sharing system where a pool set up primarily to serve the municipality and its employees was extended to become accessible on equal terms to the general public outside of office hours (Vik 2019). This way, the performance has been greatly increased, as cars may be used 24/7. Public access is administered through an existing app (Moveabout.no), and a phone-based support system is in existence, connected to the municipality's initial lease contract. This is available also to civil users until 21:00 in the evening. One challenge is how to ensure that cars are easily accessible to citizens, as the municipal offices/parking spots are in the centre, while people typically live further out. A process is developing to ensure accessibility by letting employees drive cars from/to work, parking them at designated locations in the suburbs.

Din Bybil (Your Citycar)

Norwegian railway operator NSB (Norwegian State Railways) changed their name to Vy and teamed up with GreenMobility (Danish) to offer a car-sharing service in Oslo. With 250 cars spread all over the city, this move, as well as the name change, signals that Vy is looking to expand its business in new areas. What sets this service apart from traditional car rental services is that reservations and payments are handled through an app and that cars may be left in all public parking spaces, not only at a central location. The cars can be booked up to 30 minutes in advance and are unlocked through the No key is needed in the process. All cars are electric, and GreenMobility takes care of charging the batteries. In a way, this is a scaled-up version of the e-scooter services that have become very popular since 2019 (e.g., VOI., Tier, Circ, Lime).

Nabobil (Neighbour Car)

The peer-to-peer car-sharing service Nabobil was founded in 2015 and has become one of the leading Norwegian sharing economy businesses. The cars are owned privately, and the platform mediates between car owners and potential drivers. A typical owner rents out the car that she uses herself in vacant periods. This generates an extra income that, in some cases, inspires owners to buy extra cars that they rent out full-time. The company announces on their website that they have 7500 registered cars spread-out all-over Norway, of which 650 are equipped with keyless technology so that they can be accessed from the Nabobil. According to the company founder, the goal is to enable living without owning a car in cities such as Oslo and not to need a second car in smaller towns (Tobiassen 2016). In June 2019, American company Getaround bought Nabobil for 12 million USD as a move to enter the Nordic car-sharing market. In April 2019, Getaround announced that they had acquired Drivy for about 300 USD, uniting the leading American and European car-sharing platforms. Getaround is partly owned by Softbank, an investor known for encouraging rapid growth in the companies they own.

BAZEAT/BAZPOINT

BAZEAT/BAZPOINT is a logistics solution to combat low population density and long distances for marketing and distributing locally grown food in rural Norway. Recent years have seen a large rise in small-scale, sustainable, local food production, especially in remote areas of Norway. The activity is currently encouraged as a small-scale farm economic diversity to increase farmers' income and secure sustainable living in the countryside. The challenge is how to efficiently move products from multiple dispersed small-scale producers to multiple individual customers residing in towns and cities widely distributed from the origin of the products.

BAZEAT is a peer-to-peer, Internet/app-based solution utilising three tools for logistics:

- 1) Organizing producers' distribution where producers deliver to (groups of) customers.
- 2) Organizing BAZPOINTS—pick-up centres at set locations (often co-opting with existing local shops).
- 3) Through an app, organize a voluntary “fleet” of couriers by recruiting people who are driving the distances in question to act as couriers en-route—for a small remuneration.

BAZEAT was launched in 2018 and has grown slowly but steadily. Today it seems the main challenge is to recruit to the fleet of couriers.

Tise

Tise provides an app for second-hand fashion catering to a young, fashionable, social media-savvy crowd. It is comparable to Depop. Tise copies the Instagram aesthetic and seems to attract an urban and international crowd. The company is clearly profit-driven and has a strong start-up aesthetic. One of the employees is Jenny Skavlan, a Norwegian media personality. Tise has seen strong user growth over the last months, doubling the user numbers within five months (Buggeland Sælebakke 2017). By spring 2020, Tise had close to 200,000 users. Users can create a profile and present photos of the clothes they want to sell like on Instagram. Users can follow other users and become successful on the platform.

Fjong

Fjong is an Oslo-based fashion start-up for borrowing and lending clothes, founded by Sigrun Syverud and Marie Ameln in 2016. Both had previously worked in finance and noticed a need for more sustainable alternatives to fast fashion. Fjong has been described as an Airbnb for clothes and offers over 4,000 items of new and second-hand clothing from a wide range of global brands. It specialises in women's fashion, with a showroom in Oslo, where interested users can both lend and borrow their clothes for a minimum of four days and a maximum of six months. Fjong also operates a mail service where users can receive and return clothes, taking care of the cleaning and small repairs. Those who rent out their clothes get 50% of the profit after induced costs. The company is one of the leading Norwegian start-ups led by women (Syverud 2019).

Bookis

Bookis is an Oslo-based peer-to-peer platform for books. The app-based Bookis offers a simple process for finding and buying second-hand books. Former students, identifying a need for easy recycling of course books, founded the start-up in 2016. By 2019, Bookis' customer base expanded beyond students to also cater to book lovers and readers in general. Expanding into Sweden in late 2019, they further plan to enter into Finland and Denmark. They can rely on a Finnish investor with ample expertise in the area. Their users amounted to ca. 30,000 in 2019 (Karlsrud Haugen 2019).

Den Norske Turistforening (The Norwegian Trekking Association)

The present pandemic has here spurred the emergence of a new adaptation related to the sharing economy. The need for a contact-free, resilient, and easily accessible solution spurred Norway's largest outdoor NGO, Den Norske Turistforening (DNT), to redesign the booking of the more than 500 cabins they own or manage. Their cabins were spread all over the Norwegian outdoors, directly available to all members—with no request for booking ahead. As a member, you got your own master-key to all cabins and could enter and use it at your own will. Because of COVID-19, restrictions had to be put on the use of cabins, and a simple, existing Internet-based booking system was redesigned, enforcing mandatory booking for all. The solution now includes all DNTs cabins and can be used by everyone, not only members.

This solution fulfils all the features defining the sharing economy and can be compared, for example, to how Airbnb functions. Still, DNTs solution emerged not because of the growing sharing economy but rather as a response to the need for novel solutions in a challenging situation. Thus, we may look upon their solution as an example of what may happen when novel approaches become part of the ordinary tools for business.

Context

In 2019, important changes were introduced in Norway that affected the context for participating in the sharing economy. In a follow-up to Regjeringen (2017), a new version of the Professional Transport Act was approved in June 2019, planned to take effect from the summer of 2020. It removed the cap on the number of taxi licences that the regional governments can supply and opened for taxis no longer to need registration with a central office. There are some new criteria for drives, for example, first aid training. This change enables transportation providers such as Uber and Lyft

to return. Uber left Norway after a damaging court case in 2017 (Bach and Moe 2019). In May 2020, it seemed likely the date for the law to take effect seems is postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a desire to protect jobs in the traditional taxi industry. The regulations on hosting through short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb were tightened in 2019. The revised law (eierseksjonsloven) states that homes must not be rented out as short-term rentals (STRs) for more than 90 days per year. In condominiums, STRs are limited to 30 days per year (Solli 2019). The law aims at preventing excessive commercial practices in the sector.

Developments

A new phenomenon in 2019 was the large-scale deployment of electric scooters in major cities. The key actors in this market are Voi (Swedish), Tier Mobility (German) and Ryde (Norwegian). Others include Circ (German, formerly known as Flash), Libo (Norwegian) and Zvipp (Norwegian). The companies differentiate themselves based on their service profile, app, price as well as costs for maintenance and charging.

It is estimated that Airbnb now provides about half the number of available hotel rooms in Norway and that the platform sold about one-fifth of all bookings in 2018. Reports from Capia (an analysis bureau using data from Airdna) showed record growth for Airbnb in Norway (NHO Reiseliv 2019b). The number of rooms sold during June, July, and August 2019 grew by 22% from the same period the previous year, totalling 2.2 million sold rooms. In 2018, Capia found that in tourist hot spots Lofoten and Oslo, the market share of Airbnb is about 55% and 35%, respectively (NHO Reiseliv 2019a). The total income for Airbnb in Norway in 2018 is estimated at NOK 2.3 bn. (EUR 210 mill.), of which NOK 1.8 bn. (EUR 165 mill.) was taxable. These statistics were collected for the Norwegian Hospitality Association (NHO Reiseliv) and are used to argue that Airbnb is a threat to conventional hotels in Norway. Media statements from local politicians in growth areas are mostly supportive of the extra income that the communities raise through Airbnb.

Issues

Food distribution service Foodora faced its first strike in September 2019. 85 bike riders demanded higher wages, and that expenses for maintaining their bikes should be covered by their platform provider. After five weeks, Foodora finally agreed to sign a collective agreement with the labour union (NTF, Fellesforbundet). The case was seen by many as a test for whether the working conditions in the platform economy can be organized in line with traditional businesses.

The government of Trondheim, Norway's third-largest city, chose to ban electric scooters until regulations about parking are in place.

In Oslo, Voi has applied permission to install special racks in hot spots to tidy up parking. The applications have been denied in some parts of the capital, for example, because selected areas are already occupied by bike-sharing racks. Regulators in other parts have welcomed the move and made their own suggestions of where it may be appropriate to install them.

As has been observed in other countries, there are several reports of smaller traffic accidents involving electric scooters, and quite a few scooters are being unregulated

disposed of in rivers, bushes etc. The media debate has centred on the safety of blind pedestrians (since the scooters are practically silent) and the crowding of parked scooters in public spaces, such as sidewalks. It remains to be seen how well the scooters will hold up in the Norwegian winter.

Other Major Players

Research on the sharing economy in Norway is fragmented, with several institutes having published some relevant reports in the past three years. This includes the University of Oslo, Fafo, BI, Nordlandsforskning, SNF, NHH, TØI, SINTEF, Vista Analyse and others.

Shifter (www.shifter.no)

It is an online news portal focusing on start-ups and radical innovation. News on developments in the sharing economy is also covered extensively by the technically oriented news portal Teknisk Ukeblad (www.tu.no).

Future Directions of Research

Although the sharing economy still represents a small fraction of the economy, there are important questions that should be addressed scientifically, both from a business and from a societal point of view. From a research perspective, many aspects of the Norwegian sharing economy remain to be explored, including research on commercial and international sharing platforms such as Airbnb as well as local, non-commercial, and community-driven initiatives. Research that goes beyond individual cases and offers comparative scope is particularly needed. For example, future research could compare different municipalities or regions in Norway in terms of uptake of sharing economy services. Investigating the sharing economy from a multi-stakeholder and ecosystem perspective that takes into account the role of providers, consumers, platforms, regulators, and third parties (e.g., neighbours of Airbnb hosts, user-by-proxy) would enhance our knowledge of the phenomenon.

The disruption of the sharing economy in the vein of the COVID-19 pandemic further offers potential for inquiry. While large for-profit companies such as Airbnb and Uber experience setbacks, smaller non-profit platforms such as Nabohjelp and DNT has seen rapid growth in use. Finally, there is considerable interest in understanding how the sharing economy, particularly when it comes to service- and labour-oriented forms, will influence the Nordic business model that is characterised by high wages, high taxes, and high skills. From a business and societal point of view, the question of aligning sustainable growth of the sharing economy with social concerns about inclusivity, worker rights, control, and fairness should be addressed through close dialogue between all major interest groups, including both the platforms, the users, the affected non-users, the regulators, the unions—and if applicable the local communities.

Summary

The sharing economy in Norway is still a young and dynamic sector, characterised by ample diversity regarding the choice of business models and platforms. Norway now

hosts both large international commercial sharing economy platforms such as Airbnb as well as local and national—often more community-driven—initiatives such as Nabohjelp and Mobilitetsprosjektet Halden. Sharing economy services are used by a considerable proportion of the Norwegian population (around one-fourth, according to Andreotti et al. 2017). Beyond its attractiveness, the sharing economy also faces considerable challenges such as the scattered regulatory landscape, the recent disruption of the transport, tourism, and hospitality sector due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown, barriers to inclusion, and issues of crowding and safety. It will remain a phenomenon to watch and study in the years to come.

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Din Bybil: <https://greenmobility.com/no/en>

FINN: <https://finn.no>

Fjong: <https://fjong.com>

Nabobil: <https://nabobil.no/en>

Nabohjelp: www.obos.no/Nabohjelp

The Norwegian Trekking Association: <https://english.dnt.no>

Tise: <https://tiseit.com>