

Talking about Collaborative Economies: Platforms, Trust and Ethnographic Methods – Keynote Talk

Ann Light
Malmö University and University of Sussex
ann.light@sussex.ac.uk

Abstract. This paper was the basis for Professor Ann Light’s keynote talk at “Ethnographies of Collaborative Economies”.

1 Introduction

There is a common wisdom in collaborative economy contexts (e.g. Botsman and Rogers 2010; Botsman 2017) that machine matching and vetting promotes the growth of exchange by supporting “strangers trusting strangers” (Slee 2016). It is true there has been fast growth in services that involve access not ownership, from car rides (e.g. Uber) to room rental (e.g. Airbnb), and the development of concepts such as *Mobility as a Service*. Against such simple attributions for this rise, Frenken and Schor (2017) observe that, as more people participate in platforms for economic reasons, social interaction declines. They suggest that the codification of trust into ratings and technical fixes, such as smart locks for home lets, mean less face-to-face contact, commenting that sharing platforms may instead be harmful to social cohesion. Looking at these shifts, growth in the collaborative economy can be seen to align with trusting the legalistic processes of verification and the technical mediation offered by corporations and their platforms (e.g. Lampinen and Brown, 2017). Strangers are not so much trusting strangers as machines and contracts.

Addressing these concerns, Hawlitschek et al (2016) point to three foci for trust in the sharing economy: peer, platform and product. Another category of trust, outside this definition, relates to the social impact of the organisations behind these platforms and their careful management of image (e.g. Airbnb 2014, Cox and Slee 2016). Taking all these elements into consideration, we can ask how transitions in trust that affect engagement might be observed.



The answer inevitably points to more than one method. My examples reveal the difference between exploring transactions at scale, such as the global activities of the scaling sharing economy (Light and Miskelly 2019), and considering the growth of trust and social exchange over time in specific places. Both shape relations, affecting how people live alongside each other, but there is little in the way of parallel as to how. Being interested in the growth of ‘relational assets’ (Light and Miskelly 2015), of which I would claim, neighbourhood trust is one, I discuss two local case studies before considering my own experience as a means of making the global local. To understand these particular contexts, I draw on the use of multiple sources – short and long-term observation, interviews and auto-ethnography.

2 The Role of Trust in Society

Most writing on trust in the sharing economy focuses on applications for trust, not trust itself or the body of analysis that considers trust as a social force. Considerable sociological imagination has been applied to the work that trust does for/between people. For instance, Lewis and Weigert (1985) describe trust as a functional alternative to rational prediction. It is a relational quality that reduces complexity and allows people to make rapid judgments on situations (ibid). Meanwhile Giddens addresses both trust and the reliability of structures, introducing the related idea of ontological security (1990), a feeling you can trust in the integrity of people and reliability of things: ‘the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self identity and in the constancy of their surrounding social and material environments of action’ (Giddens, 1990:92). He argues that trust is precisely the link between faith and confidence that is neither one nor other. Luhmann (1979) points to how the act of trusting relies on a belief that others trust – in other words, a trust in trust. Individuals are able to make the leap of trust on the assumption that others in the social world join in the leap. Above all, this body of work recognizes trust as a collective attribute, applicable to relations among people rather than psychological states taken individually (Lewis and Weigert 1985).

However, Cheshire, writing about the quality of trust in online contexts, points to its elusive nature from a design perspective (2013). He draws attention to the three key features of designing for what he calls *interpersonal* trust:

- Repeated interactions between parties over time
- Acts of risk-taking
- The presence of uncertainty;

leading him to the paradox of building assurance structures - such as those that guarantee risk-free interactions on sharing economy platforms - which decrease uncertainty and thus the potential for interpersonal trust. In other words, he shows

that designing for “trust” in a technical system can actually decrease the potential for trust. If we use Giddens’ language, the emphasis on reliability comes at the expense of a need for integrity.

3 The Scaling Sharing Economy

If we now turn to sharing economy applications, we see trust in harness to reliability as a major factor in promoting the use of global services. Clearly, profit motives inform the giants – what Shareable refers to as its Deathstars (Gorenflo 2015). I have drawn attention to the qualities that characterize a would-be monopoly at scale in describing Airbnb (Light and Miskelly 2019):

- *Crisp*: brokering homes (and ‘experiences’) using an automated search process, handling vetting and payment.
- *Scaling, homogenizing*: The platform HQ is far from the trade it brokers, using the Internet to perform functions and collect data on users.
- *Individualizing, monetizing*: It enables financial transactions for individual renters and hosts. As broker, it takes a cut.
- *Unscrupulous*: It acts to weaken social and legal protection to increase reach and profit. It mobilizes users against regulators. It avoids tax where it can. (Beyond its own market, it is driving up rents as people take properties out of rental – it takes no responsibility for this ‘externality’.)

Reading this list, many people can no longer trust in the benign motives of the business behind the platform, for we can see that any claims it makes must be balanced with recognition that it is working to erode social bonds across a number of dimensions. Some of these are deliberate – such as changing legislation to reduce tax liabilities – and others are more incidental – such as bringing a financialized and individualized culture into places where more socially conceived forms of interdependence were in operation.

4 Other Economies

To this example of a force that destroys conditions for trust, I want to bring two examples of more localized, collective and non-financial encounter. Both are written up elsewhere (Light and Miskelly 2014, 2015 and 2019), so I will not dwell on details but give enough material to support the argument here.

The first example is a cross-sectional study of collective sharing initiatives in a small neighbourhood of London (see Light and Miskelly 2014, 2015 and 2019).

These themes and participants derive from the *Design for Sharing* study in 2013 (Light and Miskelly 2014) were:

- **One small thing** – building a microlibrary
- **Mobilisation** – saving community-asset pub
- **Growing gains** – managing a community garden over time
- **Rootedness** – creating a digital whip-round service with a local shopfront
- **Networks in the making** – extending support by linking the communal shed with local state and third sector service providers
- **Scale and tempo** – replicating the time bank when growth required extension
- **Stepping into the weave** – cultivating participation through the work of a conservation society (adapted from Light and Miskelly 2014)

The second example involved a longitudinal study of another South London initiative (Light 2019, Light and Miskelly 2019). The Makerhood platform was launched in 2010 to connect local craft makers with purchasers. Makerhood is a social enterprise led by volunteers and overseen by a steering group, showcasing the work of local makers in Brixton to encourage a buy-local ethos. At outset, it was an ecommerce brokering platform, but that model gave way during its first years as it became obvious that the platform's value was not to manage money, but to connect and support makers, reflecting the founders' (environmental and social) sustainability goals emphasizing quality of life and reduced consumption. The Makerhood model shifted from one-to-one meetings between makers and their customers to assembling people with an interest in craft and business. Bringing makers face-to-face to make craft and share concerns became as important as online marketing. Gradually this devolved too and club events were run by local makers instead of the core team. The platform primarily supports making, selling and networking, not bringing people together to share goods, though its orientation has promoted a sharing culture. Yet, Makerhood had very local ambitions and a sense that scaling would not suit the project or benefit the neighbourhoods it might scale to and it devolved leadership to share opportunities, skills, materials and platform ownership.

These examples point to relational assets: 'the social benefits that emerge over time from local sharing initiatives, making further initiatives more likely to succeed' (Light and Miskelly 2015). These relational assets are place-based – they do not pertain to an individual, but change imaginaries and aspirations for a locale, thus also changing the dynamics of an area. Trust is a significant part of these relational assets: and, like trust in trust (Luhmann 1979), these assets can embody a virtuous cycle – where the more you give the more you get. Clearly some parts of a community and some communities will benefit more from developing this culture, but, it's said, a rising tide lifts all boats.

In both examples, we observed that people engage in small-scale collaborations and communal ownerships, leading to more ambitious projects as a group. Strangers are welcomed into creative association and cease to be strangers. Leaders emerge and become known and trusted. Informal systems develop that suit those participating – and part of growing (and feeling) this trust in each other is evolving systems together. This evolution is established by thinking about scale and leadership and what is appropriate to ask of people in terms of distance, work and commitment.

In recent work (Light and Miskelly 2019), we looked at how this extends into the sociotechnical infrastructuring of networks built by actions of collaboration, sharing and using each other's resources. This we defined as meshing.

5 Trusting Each Other

Elsewhere, I have considered the ethics of research in and with communities over the years (e.g. Light et al 2011, Light and Akama 2019). In looking at these processes, it has become clear to me that the process of 'informed consent', which is required for involving people in research studies (particularly in UK and US research contexts), attempts to take nothing on trust. In these contexts, trust is regarded as a 'faulty' way of knowing because it cannot be publicly verifiable and legislated for. Everything must be spelled out and agreed ahead of any relationship developing, providing everyone with the knowledge on which to base relations. This allows people to trust in the reliability of the research process and detect any deviations in researcher behaviour, which then may be treated with distrust.

The nature of trust in integrity, as indicated above, is that it emerges over time and evolves as confidence increases, and the process of consent-securing at outset may help build trust in moderating perceptions of risk, but it is antithetical to it. Yoko and I argue that trust may be, in fact, a contrasting kind of knowledge that people develop over years of experience with social situations (2019). It may be risky, but it does not need to be random. Choosing to trust people - in the moment, for the task at hand - is a kind of informed judgment. So, though trust is often dismissed as the absence of knowledge, it is knowledge based on different criteria. In organizational literature, it is considered a balance of cognition-based and affective response to others, which is then linked to action such as 'relying' on someone (e.g. McAllister 1995). As a way of knowing, it is embodied, situated and frequently hard to articulate. The experience of it has close links with affect, captured perhaps in that we talk of 'feeling trust', even if we draw on knowledges and experiences to support it. Looked at as informed judgment, trust becomes a hugely important part of constituting and maintaining collaborative economies: it is a full partner in collaboration.

But I want to make clear that trust is not *consensus*, with all the flattening out and removal of difference that the concept of consensus carries. It is not recognition of likeness (indeed, McAllister shows that recognizing likeness is not directly correlated with trusting, 1995). Instead, it may be recognition, in difference, of shared steadfastness or a shared desire for steadfastness. Thus, it is an enabler of difference. It creates the affective space needed to hold the recognition of difference in relation with the act of coming together and collaborating. We might see this as beneficial impact of increasing ontological security (Giddens 1990). I want to argue that, in these neoliberal times, by accepting difference and yet providing a means of coming together, we recharge *the political*, allowing critical and creative dynamics to shape economic relations. This acts as a corrective to relying on and supporting the *transactional* to inform our economies and shared doings, with a reductive understanding of relations.

6 The Application of Trust

Trust has a correlate in suspicion and scepticism. I know, in using Airbnb, I am using a company that I do not trust, even while I am picking homes to visit. I do have a level of trust in the owners' descriptions and integrity (peers/product) because I read carefully and base my judgment on how things are said. I also trust that my payment will be handled correctly (platform), despite not trusting the uses my data will be put to or that the company can avoid accidental data breaches. I am valuing convenience and novelty over my own sense of how the world should be. As will be clear, I am also aware of the wider impacts that Airbnb has on society and do not consider these to be desirable. With newer unscrupulous services, such as Uber, I have chosen not to adopt them, yet I tried Airbnb so early (and found its promise so exciting) that I am now caught in an embodied personal recognition of how little *using* equates in any simple way to *trusting*. A trust for some aspects of these transactions develops over time in tandem with some distrust, dismay and resignation.

Trust is simpler than exhaustive research, yet simpler still is not to engage. The hard work of trusting others has been captured by Carr (2016), who shows why ownership may be a more attractive option than sharing resources in a neighbourhood. Yet, he gives a glib account of the problems, using the archetype of sharing an electric drill between neighbours: 'You have to hash out the financial and logistical arrangements, you have to figure out where the drill happens to be at the moment you need it, and you have to go out and pick it up and bring it home (burning gas, perhaps, as well as time). And if somebody else wants to use the drill at the same time you need it, then you're in for some negotiations and probably some aggravation. And if the drill breaks or gets lost (or a "little screw head" gets misplaced), a whole new set of transaction costs kick in.' (Carr 2016).

The joy of observing the growth of collective initiatives at a local level and focusing upon those people and enterprises that believe in doing the work of trusting and sharing is being able to offer an alternative vision. Collective systems have their own challenges, but they offer a structure for managing both collaborative practices of work and trust. As Philippe of the timebank in south London concludes: ‘The value of sharing is people connecting. It’s a social value. I think it goes beyond “I’ve got a spare drill, you can use that”. In sharing my drill with you, I’m connecting with you and, if I’m connecting with you, I’ve got potentially a sense of identity with a community of people or a neighbourhood.’ (see also Light and Miskelly 2014).

There may be work we can do to reduce the friction and a good start is a more nuanced reading of trust issues based on contextual study and encounter.

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