

Expanded abstract

Deconstructing the “peer-to-peer sharing economy”: The challenge of the collaborative economy to platform co-operatives in the post-labor age of the 21st Century

Objectives

Purpose – A new industrial revolution is going to change the world we live, especially the economy. Where do we focus our attention if we wish to see the effects of digital technology on capitalism? We can turn to the technology sector, even if this sector remains a relatively small part of the economy today. If we focus on the economy, some people call the new phenomenon of the ‘sharing economy’ with different names such as digital economy, gig economy, platform economy, access economy, or collaborative consumption, among others. From the traditional contradiction of labor and capital, a detailed analysis of the concept of “collaboration” as a translation of “sharing” was carried out, employing a chronological review of the main research publications that are shaping the dynamics of the new economic paradigm in the framework of greater efficiency, resulting from decentralization and heterogeneity.

The main concern is the emergence of peer-to-peer digital platforms, today known as “the sharing economy”, which has enabled individuals to make use of under-utilized inventory via fee-based sharing, as a way of obtaining, giving, or sharing access to goods and services. The sharing economy creates new potential sources of revenue and profit by expanding markets (new customers who cannot afford to own a product or do not have sufficient need to do so) and increasing willingness to pay more (consumers would invest or be willing to pay higher prices for goods that could generate a revenue stream by being shared). Platform co-operatives present a possible alternative to traditional platforms which tend towards global monopoly, concentrate power, and erode workers’ rights. Drawing on a cooperative lineage which expands ownership and control, platform cooperatives could present a brighter future even if there are barriers to their expansion.

The way that individuals get and share information, goods and services has changed with the current century being part of the new economy because of a globalized new world and the digital revolution. It is important to pay attention to what information and related resources individuals need, and how, where, and why they access them in a globalized and digital world. This is a challenge which is faced today in developed countries by the private sector which focus more on competition and efficiency; even if there is a new opportunity, ready to be explored by local and global governments, that one of public goods and improving public sector management.

Design / methodology / approach – The new concept of “collaborative economy” has become the European reference as a pseudo-equivalent to the term of interest, the “sharing economy”, which compels us to examine the nuances and differences, contextually and conceptually, as well as to conduct a more detailed analysis of published works to understand its chronological development. A literature review is presented in order to understand the evolution and transformation of the original concept of “sharing economy”, focusing on foundational books on the subject matter.

The digital enterprise or business component (“Inc”, “the platform”) deals with corporate strengths that require considerable scale and resources; and the part of the equals or participants (“Peers”) deals with the strengths of “the people” (local adaptation, specialization, personalization). When the two come together, everyone focuses on what they know best or can do best, and the collaboration is very fruitful; a nascent cooperative p2p paradigm that defends the importance of the idea of “decentralization” as a main pillar for future improvements (GONZALEZ-RODRIGUEZ & HERNANDEZ-CARRION, 2015a). It is important to highlight the possibilities of governments to be part of this digital revolution as active actors that can drive sustainable and social achievements in the future economy.

Findings / research limitations / implications – The results indicate that much of the English-language literature has not been reviewed or translated into Spanish, therefore there is an omission of associated concepts that could be essential to understand the future that economies will face. The privileging of English-language publication, almost non-translated to the Spanish language, makes the main literature inaccessible to Spanish-only speakers and other non-English researchers.

The concept “Collaborative Economy” first appears in the year 2012, in the title of a monograph/book (BAUWENS et al., 2012). Then, two years later, in 2014, the first book published by a Spanish author included this new concept in the title (CAÑIGUERAL BAGÓ, 2014). It is important to note that his approach focuses on the idea of “collaboration” as understood in a traditional way. It seems that all the confusion regarding the interpretation that can be given to the term “collaboration” is something anecdotal that hides the substantial, the new incipient global monopolies and the potential overcoming of the omnipresent contradiction between labor and capital.

“Sharing Economy” seems to be the relevant concept in order to focus on the contents that we intend to address, with the same case that can be made for the concept “P2P Economy”. From this starting reference we have identified terms as “Shared Economy”, “Collaborative Economy” or “Participatory Economy”. Of course, one can include many other pseudo-equivalent terms as used by authors, whose adoption of particular terms lean towards areas of interest or particular contexts, such as the current “economic uncertainty”, especially since 2015. Among others, we have the “Economy on demand” and “Collaborative consumption”, that refers to consumption through digital apps using internet; the “Gig Economy” that is concerned with the change of ‘proletarianization’ of employees, who have now been transformed into free-lancers or “entrepreneurs”, which some call “Work 3.0 and 4.0”, the “Uber Economy”, “Economy of services on demand”, “Access economy”, and so on.

Platforms become the basis of the concept of “Platform Capitalism”, since they facilitate and enable actions to multiply virally, thanks to the “network effect”. In 2016, the European Commission defined the “collaborative economy” as “business models” expanding the simple notion of collaboration or participation, to include activities, facilitated through “collaborative platforms”, which create an open market for the temporary use of goods or services. Therefore, the key elements in Europe will be business and market, rather than collaboration.

Conclusions / originality / value – This article elaborates a new approach to the “peer-to-peer sharing economy” phenomenon and reclaims public sector and governments as main actors to drive the challenge of the 21st century economy revolution, instead of being passive viewers of the changes that are happening all around. The passive role of governments today and the misunderstanding of the new phenomenon is a key element to consider for evaluation, whether we want to call it “sharing economy” or “collaborative economy”, that perhaps sounds more human; even if the “sharing economy” used to be a term frequently and incorrectly applied to ideas where there was a true efficient model of matching supply with demand, but perhaps with zero sharing and collaboration involved.

As a conclusion, three recommendations are proposed discussing the possible policy implications. First, the development of active economic policies and intentional planning to address the new challenges. Second, the promotion of government interventions, beyond simple regulations, especially in the field of big data and in creating digital platforms. Third, the advancement of a new generation of platform cooperatives that would help to achieve a new balance in values, in the envisioned future of a turbo-capitalism and post-labor age.

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