

# Is sharing really caring? A nuanced introduction to the peer economy

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## Introduction

A dad who works a full-time job also drives part-time on UberX to put his second kid through college. A marine geophysicist transitions into an art career, selling prints of inspirational female scientists on Etsy (Etsy 2012). Instead of working a full-time schedule, often with extended hours, a mom—dealing with injuries from her Navy training—elects for peer economy gigs across four platforms so she can configure jobs around caring for her young son (Singer 2014). This is what it looks like to earn money through the sharing economy.

This explanatory paper breaks down the sharing economy into its subcomponents and hones in on the peer economy, a subcomponent that impacts employment in the United States. The peer economy refers to online marketplaces that enable people to monetize skills and assets within their possession. The peer economy grew out of factors such as social networking and eCommerce, and increasing digital literacy has contributed to its adoption and prominence. As it grows, everyone is paying attention—corporations and strategists, investors and companies, cities and foundations, labor advocates and scholars—speculating about both the potential and shortcomings of this new commercial model. Besides speculative issues, many identified problems and challenges—tax confusion, liability, and economic dependence—stem from workers’ status as independent contractors, a classification that many Americans have never navigated.

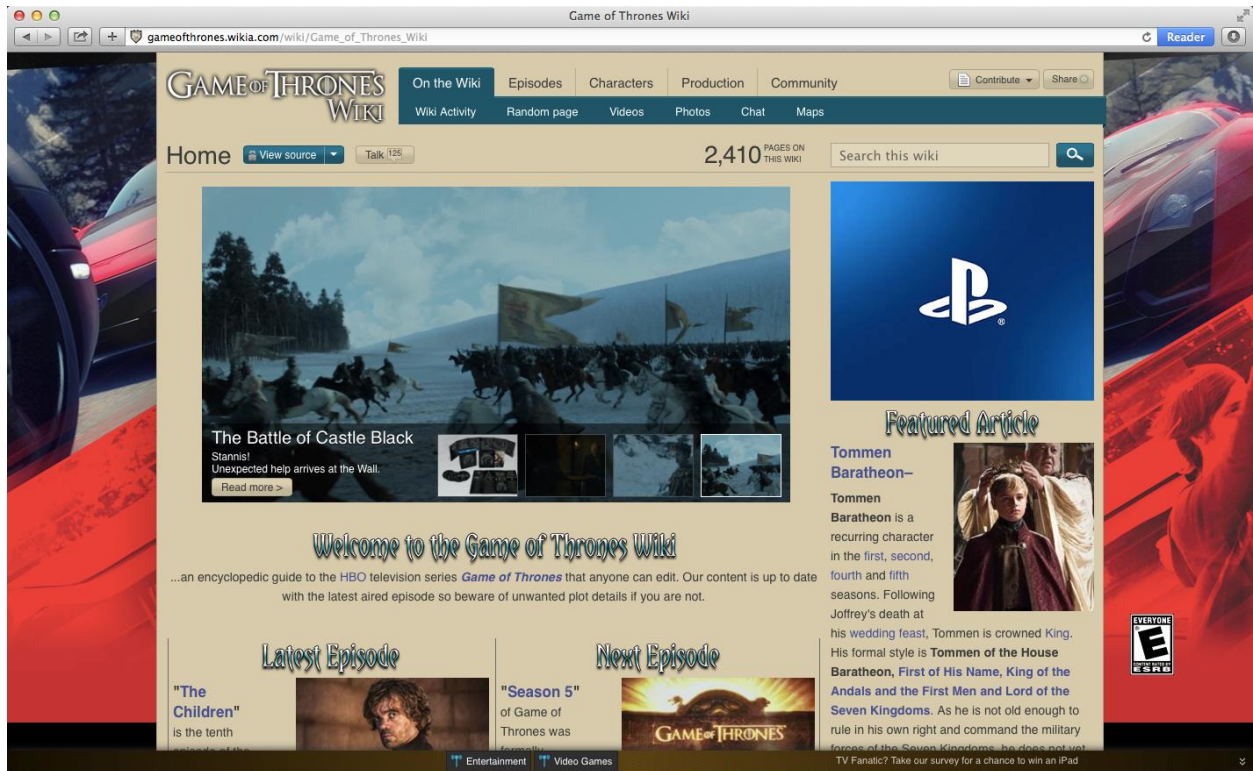
Not only do known issues act as barriers to participation for a general population, additional obstacles exist for disadvantaged populations. These populations may work at jobs that will be displaced because of competing labor in the peer economy, or they may not have the resources to take advantage of the peer economy. If action is taken to surmount these barriers, then the peer economy can represent a challenge to exploitative work, a new pathway to ownership, a more economically diverse workforce, and access to services regardless of neighborhood attributes.

## What is the “sharing economy?”

The “sharing economy’s” popularity eclipses many similar terms to explain similar phenomena, and it has grown to encompass more than a philosophy of sharing. Individuals, institutions, and entities have adopted the term to refer loosely to any socially networked system, from Kickstarter to community gardens, maker spaces to Wikipedia. These are activities, platforms, and resources that all rely on coordinating networks of people. Applications span on- and off-line realms, for-profits and not-for-profits, distributed and centralized production. When deconstructed, the sharing economy includes:

- **Peer-to-peer marketplaces** (also called the “peer economy”) – online marketplaces that enable people to monetize skills and assets within their possession. The marketplace platform acts as a meeting point between providers and customers to transact over individual services. This paper contains multiple examples of peer economy platforms. While peer-to-peer marketplaces are as old as human commerce, the peer economy is considered a phenomenon because ever-increasing Internet access and falling equipment costs catalyzed its existence. This is what distinguishes the peer economy phenomenon from its predecessors.
  - Examples throughout the paper: Airbnb, Etsy, Getaround, Shapeways, Uber and Lyft (termed “transportation network companies,” or TNCs), KitchenSurfing

- **Gift economy** – ServiceSpace, a gift economy organization, concisely describes the gifting ethos as “an arrangement for the transfer of goods or services without an agreed method of quid pro quo” (Service Space 2014).
  - Illustrated example: *The Legend of Zelda* is a 30-year old Nintendo franchise that has spawned countless videogames and products, and it has many devoted fans. Mike Hoyer’s five-year old daughter was a budding fan. The Legend of Zelda lets its players rename the main character, but the fantasy videogame is sprinkled with narratives, dialogue, and graphics indicating that the main character is a boy whose mission is to save a princess. Hoyer would change the gender pronouns when he read the dialogue to his daughter, but this was a short-term solution; one day, she would know how to read. Along with many other parents, Hoyer did not want his little girl to grow up with the message that boys are always the heroes and girls are always the damsels in distress. As a software developer, he reprogrammed the game to change all the male pronouns to female pronouns, effectively making Link into a female hero. He then freely distributed the code for other parents who want to raise empowered daughters (Hoyer 2012).
  - Other examples: Tool libraries, CouchSurfing, skillshares, fan fiction
- **Commons-based peer production** – In scholarship, “peer” is typically a reference to the commons-based peer production model. In essence, commons-based peer production describes how small contributions by countless volunteers result in cultural production—“products” like Wikipedia, or Twitter hashtag streams that cover on-the-ground earthquakes in real time. The incentive to participate has to do with social recognition and personal satisfaction (these are often grouped together as “intrinsic incentives”) (Benkler 2002).
  - Illustrated example: Wikipedia is arguably the most famous example of peer production, but the wiki software is a widespread tool. One of its most popular uses is to create fan wikis devoted to television shows such as *Babylon 5*, *Community*, and other fictional universes. Thousands of fans contribute to character pages, episode pages, and canon timelines in excruciating detail, all to share their love for these shows.



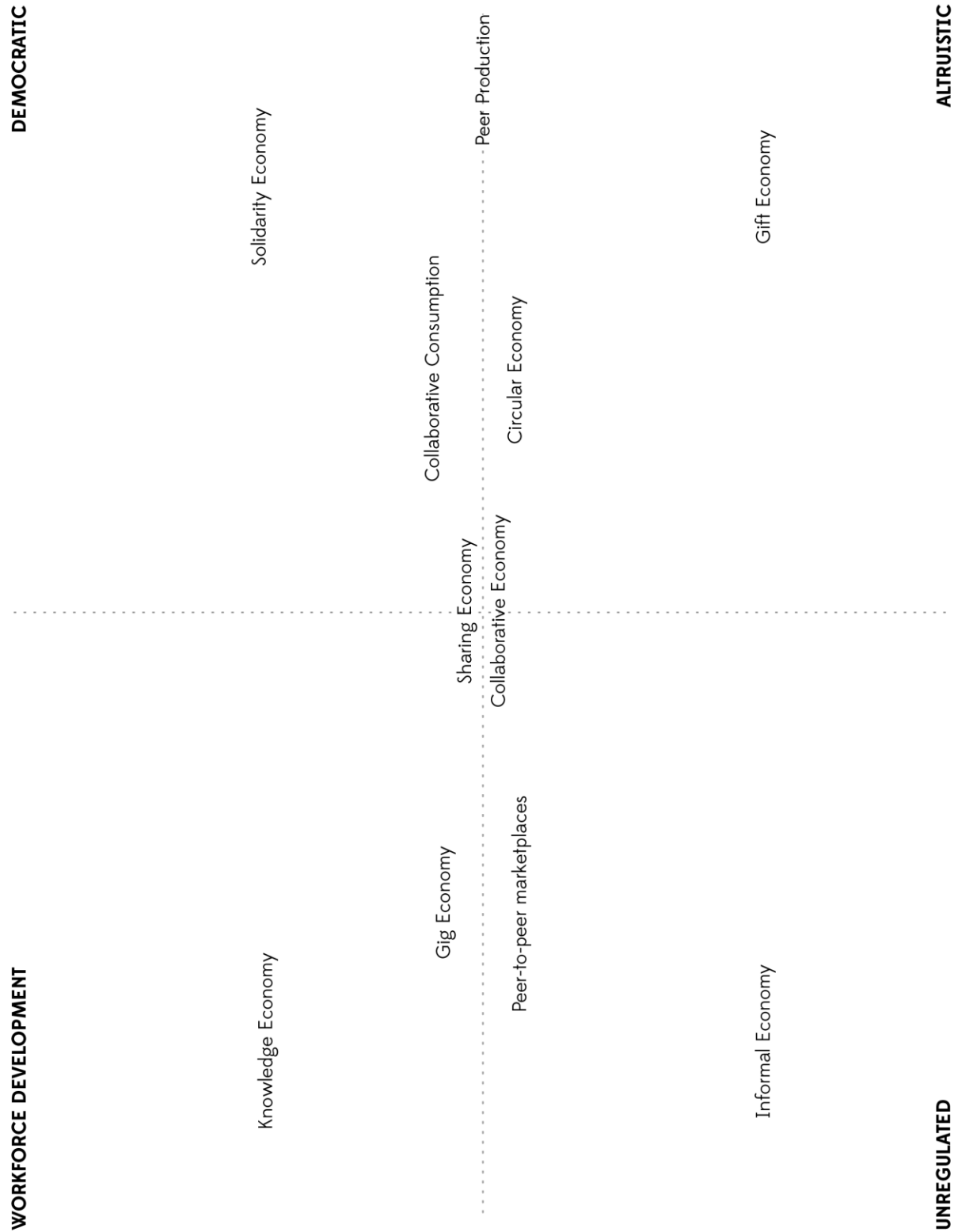
- Other examples: Open source software, aspects of citizen science, hacktivist groups like Anonymous
- **Solidarity economy/democratic wealth** – The solidarity economy mirrors capitalism, but instead of concentrated power in an executive cabinet and shareholders, the community controls the entity's wealth and direction. Since the community acts as steward, that wealth is often used for mutual aid. Wealth and capital is not only limited to money.
  - Illustrated example: A classic example of a lending circle is a collective that contributes to a fund every month. Known as a *tanda*, one member receives all of the month's dues each month. Eventually, everyone will have been a recipient and the cycle begins anew. Although theoretically, every person contributes what they get back, the concentrated burst in money makes it possible for members to make big purchases when they are the monthly recipient.
  - Other examples: The Local First movement, cooperatives, time banking
- **Collaborative Consumption** – an economy and society whose goal is net-zero production (Anderson 2013).
  - Illustrated example: ZipCar is a car rental service with vehicles distributed across urban areas. Instead of visiting a rental car agency, drivers sign up for memberships to schedule their rental. Members avoid hassle in two ways:
    1. They can avoid owning a car, which racks up costs in insurance, maintenance, parking, and fuel.
    2. Members avoid the trek to a rental car agency and the paperwork that traditionally accompanies the service.

ZipCar owns its fleet, and it relies on the fact that in urban areas, people do not use cars as often. Getaround operates similarly to ZipCar except instead of owning a fleet, Getaround coordinates peer-to-peer providers to rent out

their personal cars to driving members. Getaround exemplifies the overlap between collaborative consumption and the peer economy.

- Other examples: Community gardens, bike sharing, garage sales, clothing swaps
- **Peer-to-peer lending** – This ranges from microloans to buying debt assets, in which repayment is part of the lending process.
  - Illustrated example: Kiva Zip is a Kiva pilot launched in 2011. It offers small business loans at 0% interest, and borrowers build their credit through endorsements by both Kiva Zip community members and members from the borrower's neighborhood-based community. Lenders run the risk of losing their investment, but the social expectation acts as peer pressure to repay the loan.
  - Other examples: Lending Club, Neighbor.ly
- **Crowdfunding** – Contributions from many people that funds a specific cause or project. Crowdfunding projects often offer awards for different donation tiers, and contributors can select an award based on how much they pledge. Awards are not always part of the process, and contributors do not always pick an award. According to Rodrigo Davies, a leading researcher in civic crowdfunding, an essential characteristic of crowdfunding is that patrons are not anonymous to one another (Davies 2014).
  - Illustrated example: DonorsChoose is a crowdfunding site specifically for educational endeavors. All of the recipients on DonorsChoose are part of the K-12 public school system, and the majority of their time is spent directly with students. Project requests range from post-it notes and pencils for a poetry class to a Makerbot shared by various classrooms in the same public school. Unlike crowdlending, repayment is not expected.
  - Other examples: Patreon, Kickstarter, IndieGoGo,
- **Ridesharing** – Ridesharing and carsharing are popular terms in the peer economy, often misapplied to services such as UberX and Lyft to carpooling. Prior to the meteoric popularity of peer economy transportation services, scholars Nelson D. Chan and Susan A. Shaheen delineated the types of social transportation. Their taxonomy thoroughly distinguishes and categorizes carpooling, vanpooling, hitchhiking, car lending, ridematching, and others. The taxonomy also distinguishes between monetized and unmonetized ridesharing (Chan and Shaheen 2011).

The subcomponents of the sharing economy range from how people work to how people consume basic resources. Scholars and activists have explored aspects of consumption for years, although not necessarily under the term “sharing economy.” Meanwhile, the peer economy is a newer phenomenon that is not as well known, but it has a profound impact on the future of work in the United States.



## What is the “peer economy” and where does it come from?

Marie<sup>1</sup> once hosted a young couple in her San Francisco home. Her guests were in town for several days, and on the first morning, Marie asked about their plans. “We’re getting married!” It turned out that the young couple’s San Francisco retreat was really an elopement at city hall. With no family or friends in the area, Marie became the impromptu reception party, treating the young couple to celebratory ice cream sundaes (Focus group interviews. January 2014).

Across town, Jules and Danielle<sup>2</sup> were being evicted. They, too, had opened their home to visitors. For a few nights each month, the couple rented out their extra room on Airbnb. Not only did the additional income help them afford their notorious San Francisco rent, they had enjoyed learning from their guests. While the couple knew that they might be in violation of their lease, they did not know they were violating city ordinances and zoning laws that prohibited housing tourists and transients. The landlord gave them three days to vacate, with no recourse to cease listing their apartment. Airbnb, headquartered in San Francisco, responded coolly to Jules and Danielle. When pushed, Airbnb pointed to their terms of service, saying that Jules and Danielle should have been aware of San Francisco’s city code (Interview with author. May 2014).

These opposing experiences reflect the same platform, and despite the contrast, they represent common stories throughout peer economy.

Across articles, radio shows, and events, observers all agree: “The sharing economy isn’t new.” The term, however, is relatively new and used as a container for many concepts. While the conversation continues about how to refer to the space and its exact boundaries—Peers Inc. (Chase 2012), Collaborative Economy (Owyang et al 2014), Gig Economy (Horowitz 2013), The Mesh (Gansky 2012)—the focus for this explanatory paper is specifically online, peer-to-peer marketplaces (referred to as the “peer economy”) and their implications in the United States.

Offline peer-to-peer marketplaces existed long before their online counterparts. At their simplest, peer-to-peer marketplaces enable individuals to transact directly rather than through a third-party retailer. Familiar offline examples include bustling marketplaces like farmers markets, craft fairs, and flea markets. Although participants might be required to pay a booth fee, these markets enable vendors to transact directly with customers. Peer-to-peer activities are also a common feature of the informal economy—often characterized as commercial activity that is unregulated and untaxed. In the U.S., this includes mechanics who cruise around parking lots, offering to remove dents for car owners; a home cook who sells unpasteurized cheese or fresh baked bread to neighbors and friends; the unregulated dollar vans that serve marginalized New Yorkers more frequently than public transportation; and hawkers at a crowded park on a hot summer day.

What distinguishes online peer-to-peer marketplaces is how peer economy platforms manage risk for both sellers (also referred to as providers) and buyers (also referred to as customers and consumers), and Internet openness is the bedrock for this networked trust. Prior to the Internet, only a handful of entities and individuals had the ability to broadcast, and these privileged few were usually media companies. Individuals could only spread information as far as their immediate communities, so information discovery was more serendipitous. As legal scholar

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<sup>1</sup> Name has been anonymized.

<sup>2</sup> Names have been anonymized.



Yochai Benkler explains:

*The cost of physical capital was for more than 150 years the central organizing principle of information and cultural production, from the introduction of high-cost, high-volume mechanical presses, through telegraph, telephone, radio, film, records, television, cable, and satellite systems. These costs largely structured production around a capital-intensive, industrial model. The declining price of computation, however, has inverted the capital structure of information and cultural production. (Benkler 2002:377)*

As Internet adoption increased and the price of media production decreased, the Internet became a proofing ground for networked communication. The proliferation of networked sites such as GeoCities, Friendster, Facebook, Bebo, Reddit, and MySpace contributed to widespread literacy around social networks. Frameworks such as “social bookmarking,” “social sharing,” and “social curation”—once hotly debated terms—became part of everyday language. These interactive frameworks demand user investment; the more time that individuals spend building up their social network outposts—Instagrams, Pinterest boards, or tweets—the more satisfaction they reap in growing an engaged following. This fluency with social networking laid the groundwork for peer-to-peer marketplaces.

There are two key components that unite online peer-to-peer marketplaces and distinguish them from offline marketplaces. Social network familiarity is one of them. Mimicking other social networks, peer economy platforms often encourage multimedia content sharing, direct and in-platform communication channels (this is generally speaking; Uber does not have an in-platform communication channel for drivers), and a centralized personal profile. Additionally, peer economy platforms integrate a two-way rating and review system where both providers and customers rate their experiences with each other, and the results are publicly visible.

Providers invest significant time in both building up a marketplace profile and learning how to be effective on the platform. The combination of these factors makes providers reluctant to abandon or switch platforms on a whim. Social networking modules create an information symmetry, in which both providers and customers (who must also maintain a profile) can learn about one another before transacting. As an explanation by contrast, consider Craigslist, a peer-to-peer marketplace where anyone can post services and items for sale, and transactions happen directly between buyers and sellers. Many people who sell items on Craigslist are occasional sellers; they want to get rid of their possessions as quickly as possible, and Craigslist is a way to recoup some of the cost. Some listings may contain pictures, a description, a map of where to pick up the item, but the amount of information is up to the seller. This presents an information asymmetry: Sellers have very little incentive to be honest about their item, and a buyer has no reliable way to verify the seller’s description before scheduling an in-person exchange. If a seller misrepresents an item, or if a buyer strikes a deal with a seller and then flakes out at the last moment, everyone’s time has been wasted. Since creating a Craigslist account is simple, and Craigslist facilitates communication in order to preserve anonymity, neither party can caution other Craigslist browsers against the other party.

The second component that distinguishes the peer economy from offline marketplaces is its role in mediating payments between providers and customers. Both users give permission to the company to access their financial information (bank accounts, payment methods such as credit cards and PayPal), and as the third party facilitator, the company electronically manages the checkout process. Companies invest in and stand behind their checkout process, which reduces the risk for individuals in transacting with strangers.



The Internet has made secure eCommerce tools and massive social networking commonplace. As the guarantors of quality and reliability between strangers, these peer-to-peer marketplaces have coaxed users to transact with no reservations. Peer-to-peer consumerism is a new experience for many people, and what were once novelty services are now a natural choice for many consumers.

## Who cares about the sharing economy, and why?

Because of how well peer-to-peer marketplaces facilitate trust, incumbent corporations and services are under threat as venture capitalists invest in peer economy companies. Incumbent corporations have split reactions, either engaging lobbies or bringing on strategists who propose ways that companies can harness networked cooperation. Incumbent corporations who are interested in the peer economy want to maintain brand relevancy and shift to a lighter-cost operational framework.

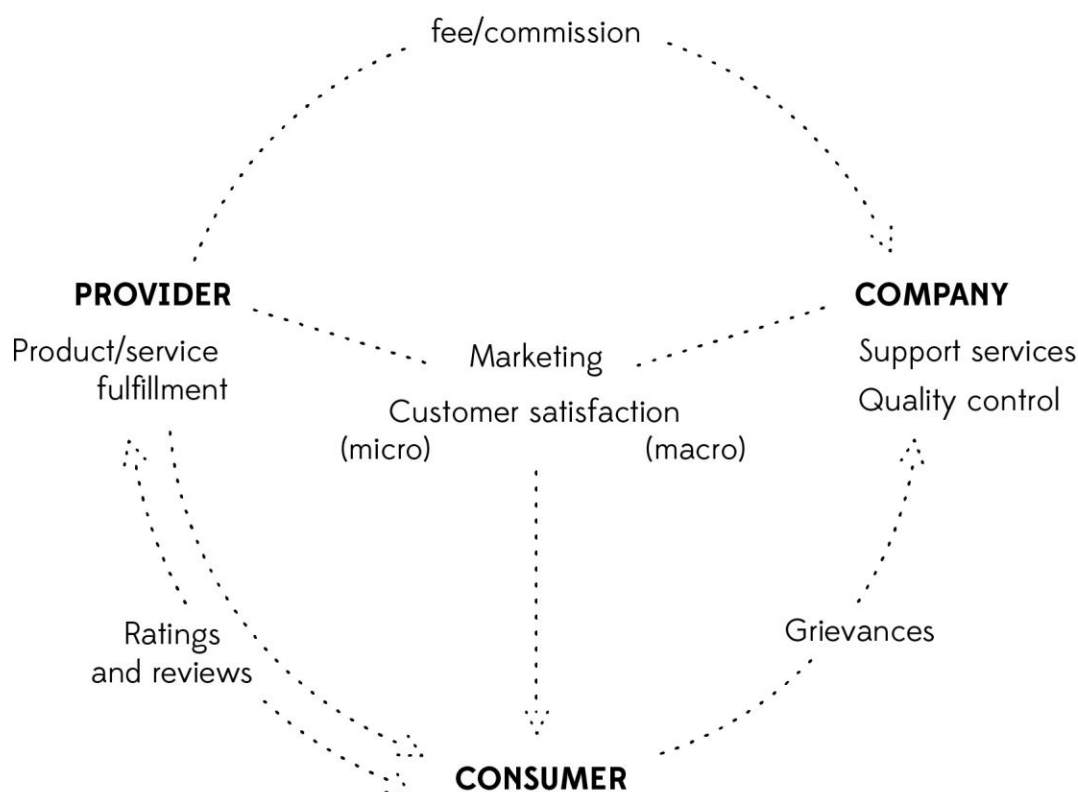
Venture capitalists tend to invest in products that scale, and their investment in peer economy companies is an early warning sign to incumbents. As companies mature, they become promising as venture capital investments. However, scalability presents a dilemma for peer-to-peer communities. To illustrate the tension, consider a basic transactional framing to distinguish between a consumer and a customer. One way to look at peer economy companies is as business-to-business ventures (B2B), where companies sell services to secondary vendors (providers) who then sell their services directly to the end consumer. Examples of this include groups like IBM and Microsoft, who sell operational software to other companies, or manufacturing supply chains such as a paper company that sells newsprint to a newspaper company. Within the B2B framing, providers are the company's customers, and consumers are the providers' customers; Uber presents itself as a lead-generation software for its partner drivers, and drivers transport passengers. In other words, drivers are the business owners who deliver the ultimate product to the end user.

However, peer-to-peer companies are also in partnership with their providers, and as business partners, their efforts jointly grow the brand and attract more consumers to companies' platforms (business-to-consumer, or B2C). Since providers and companies built the brand together, providers feel solidarity with these companies, even though companies ultimately own the brand. Peer economy companies straddle the line between B2B and B2C. The B2- framing illustrates that peer economy companies actually serve two customers in one integrated product—providers and consumers—but they only collect commission from one of the customer groups. The ambiguity adds up to a business dilemma: As peer economy companies scale their product—people's labor and transactions—they cannot be as attentive to their providers' needs, so they risk dissociating their provider-partners.

Peer economy companies are also scalable because providers are not classified as employees—they are business partners. Therefore, the companies behind these platforms do not need to meet minimum wage requirements, provide costly benefits, ensure safety standards or compensate for injuries on the job, guarantee anti-discrimination, or cover payroll tax. Companies can technically claim that their providers are making independent decisions because their providers are independent contractors, or “micro-entrepreneurs.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Micro-entrepreneurs,” sometimes written as “microentrepreneurs” or “micropreneurs,” is an oft-used term in peer economy rhetoric. It is a slightly misleading term because a “microbusiness” is technically a businesses with more than one but less than five employees.



*This diagram maps out each party's distinct duties and responsibilities to one another. Although the use fee is mapped as a provider-to-company relationship, a few companies charge the consumer rather than the provider for platform use (i.e.: oDesk).*

This lightweight workforce is why companies are nimble, but what is lightweight for companies translates into risk for providers, who take on additional costs for being independent. Although peer-to-peer platforms offer income-generation templates, providers must still take care of administrative duties (i.e.: liability coverage, self-employment tax, and deductions), distinguish themselves against other platform providers through marketing savvy, and account for the depreciation of their assets. Even so, the payoff in quality of life is significant. Providers take advantage of income generating opportunities in the peer economy for many reasons. First and foremost is flexibility. Providers choose when they want to work, what jobs they will do, who they will serve (i.e.: which passengers and which guests), and sometimes where they will work (i.e.: 97% of Etsy sellers work out of their homes (GfK 2013)). This flexibility can reintegrate many people who have been defined out of the traditional workforce—those who are retired, caretakers, persons with disabilities, the long-term unemployed, and more.

The peer economy is also a promise of supplementary income. Providers apply their supplementary income to housing costs, to cushion their lifestyle, to build their savings, and for other practical purposes. Additionally, their participation on peer-to-peer marketplaces increases income diversity, shielding against the threat of sudden job loss. Some providers view the supplementary income as a way to float other nonpaying or low-paying passions, such as the arts, performance, or founding a startup. Some providers see an opportunity to grow their supplementary income into a full income. Yet others participate in the peer economy for philosophical reasons; providers and customers who are disgusted with excess might want to

maximize the use of existing assets. They may participate because networked utilization could result in less manufacturing of new goods, thereby reducing environmental impact. Providers might participate because of the social aspect of the peer economy; commerce puts them in touch with people whom they would not meet through their routine social circles. Some of the peer economy platforms also represent an outlet for creativity. Etsy and KitchenSurfing, for example, are marketplaces for artists, craftspeople, and talented chefs to exhibit their mastery (Cheng 2014).

Jen demonstrates many of the reasons that attract providers to the peer economy. She was an early adopter on Etsy, a craft marketplace where anyone can sign on to sell handmade or vintage goods to the general public. She has always indulged in many artistic expressions, from jewelry to painting, but in 2005, Jen was starving for what she called “adult conversations” with people who shared similar interests. She is a stay-at-home mom, and her everyday conversation partners were toddlers that babbled at a preschool level. Meanwhile, her husband, a professor, had a demanding and unpredictable schedule. Jen needed a connection around her interests, and through her computer, Etsy became a portal. She connected with like-minded sellers while also adding to her family’s income from home. She even began organizing San Francisco’s community of Etsy sellers (Johnson 2014).

The flexibility of this work lifestyle is particularly attractive to local governments that want to tamp down unemployment. Foundations share a similar set of interests and concerns. The premise—monetizing skills and assets that individuals already have—suggests a low barrier to entry, and this is promising when it comes to communities of concern: transitional-aged youth, immigrant women, those who are homeless, the formerly addicted and formerly incarcerated, and the long-term unemployed. Media outlets fan this interest, both praising and decrying the sharing economy through success or cautionary stories about being a provider. Underlying all of the attention is one key question: Is the promise of the peer economy too good to be true? After all, the barrier to entry for independent income might be lower, but mostly in contrast to starting a traditional small business. Cities lack user research around what it would take to prepare their communities of concern for the peer economy and whether the financial return on individuals’ efforts would be worthwhile. Cities and regions direct resources for workforce development through local workforce investment boards. The best workforce programs offer solid skills training that are locally applicable, but moving workforce training into workforce placement is a particularly difficult step. Forward-thinking cities see the peer economy’s potential to alleviate unemployment, but they must also weigh this against regulatory concerns around safety and the loss in tax revenue that funds municipal services (few states collect tax from online purchases).

Beyond easing unemployment, my previous ethnographic research suggested that peer economy involvement could be incorporated into resume building. I conducted interviews with two women who participated on platforms that have since changed dramatically. At the time, Margot had assembled a design course for Skillshare, a peer-to-peer learning platform where students buy access to video and project-based courses across multiple subjects. Margot had been invited by Skillshare staff to be an instructor, and Skillshare actively courted other budding and brand name professionals to be instructors. For Margot, linking to her Skillshare course on her personal website was a signal to potential clients about the talent she brings. Meanwhile, Alyssa’s tenure with a nonprofit was winding down, and TaskRabbit became one source of income. TaskRabbit is a peer-to-peer task completion service, and as Alyssa took on more gigs through the platform, she realized that she really enjoyed event-based tasks. Alyssa began selecting specifically for event management, and she gained so much experience that she now confidently lists event management on her professional menu.

Labor advocates approach the peer economy cautiously. A third of the American workforce is made up of independent contractors (Greenhouse 2013), variously labeled freelancers, self-employed, microentrepreneurs, small businesses, leased workers, permalancers, provisional or on-call staff, precariats, and contingent workers. There are terms for every level of optimism and cynicism around independent contractors. Courts around the country review whether companies have misclassified their independent contractors, whether contractors are actually treated and managed more like employees (Fraunheim 2008, Fetner 2013). It is yet unclear whether the peer economy is just another exploitative system that normalizes independent contracting over hiring employees. Because providers are independent, they also do not have formalized leverage such as unionizing and collective bargaining—traditional defenses in labor abuse. In their weakened state, new and effective tactics have yet to manifest. Labor advocates are hesitant about the peer economy. They worry about a scenario where the rise of microgigs makes it acceptable to hire independent contractors instead of hiring employees who might be entitled to costly benefits.

These unknowns present opportunities for scholars to conduct more research around the peer economy. Scholarship in this area is still fledgling, and scholars often cite previous work around the gift economy, altruistic systems, and democratic wealth as the bulk of their literature. Direct scholarship on the peer economy has examined how black hosts' profile pictures on Airbnb affect their commercial prospects (Edelman and Luca 2014). It has examined the impact of Airbnb on the hotel industry in Texas, finding that Airbnb takes away business from lower-end hotels and does not much affect amenity-rich hotels (Zervas et al 2014). There is plenty of research on Amazon Mechanical Turk, a platform where people complete microtasks to earn cents and dollars at a time. Some older qualitative research tracked changes in Etsy's community ethos as the platform scales (Abrahams 2008). Many papers attempt to establish taxonomies and plumb motivations across ridesharing (Chan and Shaheen 2011), the peer economy (Cheng 2014a), the sharing economy (PolicyInteractive 2014), crowdsourcing and crowdwork (Kittur et al 2013), and digital labor (Scholz 2013).

Peer economy stakeholders include providers, venture capitalists and companies, corporations and lobbyists, strategists and scholars, and cities and foundations. No single group holds the key to the peer economy. Challenges and known problems in the peer economy are multilayered, and cooperation across interconnected stakeholders can foster a supportive provider experience.

## Current challenges for the peer economy

Besides the potential of the peer economy, there are also known challenges and problems. Some issues have already been mentioned—lack of benefits, product and service liability, no minimum wage or sick leave—all of which stem from shortcomings in legal worker classification. The federal government distinguishes between workers as either employees or independent contractors. When challenged, a worker who disputes classification is measured against two tests: the common law of agency and the economic realities test. In sum, the common law of agency is a running tally of whether the client is in ultimate control of how the contractor performs the work, or whether the contractor is the one who determines how a service or product is delivered (this indicates that their service is a private, entrepreneurial endeavor). The economic realities test considers whether a worker who works full weeks or works an on-call schedule is actually captive to an employer for base financial stability. While a worker may be identified as an independent contractor by one law and not the other, neither of them is meant to be the deciding test (although the common law is often used as such); rather, courts base decisions on a hybrid test constructed from both of the previous tests (Muhl 2002).

While benefits that typically accompany employment are most beneficial to providers who want to earn a full income through peer-to-peer marketplaces, the stark difference between employees and independent contractors affect every provider. Of particular and immediate concern are tax reporting, insurance issues, and liability.

All providers are independent contractors but, at present, most providers do not think of themselves as entrepreneurs (Cheng 2014a). Many providers hold down traditional jobs or are accustomed to full-time employment. Employers withhold certain taxes for their employees, and they handle payroll tax to the federal government (7.5%; the other half of the labor tax is passed on to employees, who only contend with this at tax time). However, independent contractors must pay self-employment tax, or 15% of their revenue. Employees qualify for unemployment benefits while independent contractors do not, and independent contractors are not protected by anti-discrimination, labor safety, and fair labor legislation. Peer economy companies come across the tax confusion repeatedly when their providers receive notifications from the Internal Revenue Service that they owe more taxes than they realized. It is such a common problem that venture capital group Collaborative Fund published an online primer to answer basic questions about the 1099 tax filing status (companies cannot legally provide tax advice to their providers) (Collaborative Fund 2013, Escarlate 2013).

Liability has also been unclear for both customers and providers. Some peer-to-peer marketplaces build in insurance for their providers should their property be damaged during a transaction (i.e.: Airbnb has a \$1 million dollar policy for hosts whose space has been damaged by a guest<sup>4</sup>). Some companies cover any harm that might befall a customer while engaging in a transaction (i.e.: transportation network companies—TNCs—such as Uber and Lyft cover any medical fees should a passenger be injured in an accident). However, companies are not technically responsible for obtaining licenses or paying operating fees associated with their providers' services, as illustrated through Jules and Danielle's eviction experience.

An example that haunts the peer economy is the death of six-year old Sofia Liu. On the eve of 2014, Sofia stepped out on the crosswalk, just ahead of her family, and a moment later, she lay lifeless in the intersection. An Uber driver struck her down in a tragic but typical car accident, and a bereaved family naturally turned to sue Uber. Uber, however, placed the blame on its driver. The driver may have been logged in for a shift, but the driver was in between a drop-off and pick-up and therefore not actually driving for UberX at the time of the accident. Uber could not be held responsible (Williams and Kale 2014).

The accident had a chilling effect in the peer economy, especially for TNC drivers. TNCs have actively churned out alternative liability coverage ever since, but they are not the only ones who face the changing perception of work and responsibility. Todd Blatt, a long-time member on the digital fabrication platform Shapeways, is especially talented at 3D modeling. As a fan of *Super 8*, a Paramount movie, Blatt made a replica of a special die—a prominent artifact in that sci-fi universe. In his model, Blatt made sure to capture every scratch and detail of the movie production die. He uploaded the file to Shapeways for 3D printing, and other *Super 8* fans were excited to order directly through Blatt's Shapeways storefront. Within 18 hours of the upload,

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<sup>4</sup> In 2011, a woman who rented out her San Francisco home returned to an entirely trashed apartment. Her guests had smashed through walls and locked closets to steal valuables such as her grandmother's jewelry, her passport, and other identifying and financial information. The guests not only made good use of all of the amenities, they also splashed cleaners across the host's furniture and electronics (the host assumes it was to get rid of finger prints). At the time, Airbnb excused itself from financial responsibility for the incident, as hosts are technically independent contractors. Following a public relations maelstrom, Airbnb instituted its first host guarantee policy, which was originally \$50,000 and has since grown to \$1 million (Arrington 2011, Airbnb 2014).

Blatt received a cease-and-desist order from Paramount, who had sold official replica rights to a private company. Blatt may have suspected that another company already owned the official rights, but even companies that specialize in replicas do not necessarily create perfect reproductions because to do so would increase costs for mass manufacturing. The private company eventually released its *Super 8* die, and Blatt still found that his replica had greater fidelity with the movie production artifact (Anderson 2011, Blatt 2011 and 2014).

Other unresolved liability issues include whether services meet safety standards (space-based platforms), account for food poisoning (food-based platforms), meet material standards (product-based platforms), and provide gap coverage (transportation network services). Independent contractors are traditionally responsible for such liability, but since the brand promise of peer-to-peer companies is how easy it is to get started, assuming these liabilities would be a barrier to entry for many providers and would severely lower marketplace participation. Some companies have hired insurance brokers to figure out coverage; in the meantime, they pay out on a catastrophe-by-catastrophe basis.

Due to the independent contractor status, an immediate concern is whether providers have an effective voice in company decisions. Transparency is also an issue. During my ethnographic research, TNC drivers expressed concern about when and why drivers are banned on a platform. Superficially, it is clear that when drivers fall below a certain reputational ranking, they will be asked to leave the platform. However, drivers only have the company's word for it, and for some drivers, that is too opaque. Without employee protections—for example, union strikes where employees cannot be penalized through job termination—independent contractors have very little leverage. In an unusual win, UberBlack and UberSUV drivers succeeded in a protest against the company. Uber has several transportation tiers, and Black and SUV are its higher-end services. The company wanted to funnel some of UberX's demand surplus to Black and SUV drivers. In the UberX tier, drivers do not need special vehicle-for-hire licenses, and they use personal vehicles to transport passengers (Griswold 2014). UberX fares are much lower than other tiers, and drivers face unpredictable and frequent fare reductions. Meanwhile Black and SUV drivers hold livery and chauffeur licenses, undergo background checks and annual vehicle maintenance checks, carry liability insurance, and must display certification stickers on their back windows.

Protests against Uber are a common news story, and the company rarely responds, especially when the protestors are UberX drivers. Black and SUV drivers have greater leverage than UberX drivers since premium drivers are not as easy to replace. Black and SUV also serve a different, usually wealthier clientele—a customer base that Uber values. While UberX drivers have previously threatened to leave Uber en masse, the company had an advantage because there was always enough driver supply to replace UberX dissidents. However, as fares continue to fall, the demand for UberX rides are beginning to outpace drivers. Compounding this is that the two major TNC companies—Uber and Lyft—are fighting for drivers. Each company has tried to poach the other's drivers by offering cash bonuses to drive on their platforms (Huet 2014). Uber employees even hailed more than 5,000 Lyft rides only to cancel the ride, presumably to decrease Lyft's availability to passengers and to frustrate Lyft drivers to defect to Uber (Fink 2014). As fares fall, the passenger base increases, but protests become more frequent. Media are quick to report these stories, but it was not till UberBlack drivers—backed by certifications and claims to a desirable clientele—expected their fares to plummet that a protest had its intended effect.



## Tensions and structural inequalities as barriers to participation

Although the full-income use case receives the most attention, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of peer economy providers are partial income earners<sup>5</sup>. These users are the most appreciative of the range of reasons to participate in the peer economy; they see it as a complement to other endeavors, whether it is the pursuit of other passions, meeting new people or building a likeminded community, and as just one of a few income streams. Those who rely heavily on peer economy marketplaces for long-term, full-income are happiest if their participation is a lateral move from a similarly paying job in the same industry (i.e.: shuttle or taxi drivers who enjoy more flexibility as transportation network drivers on Lyft, SideCar, or Uber).

Besides vehicles and direct service, the range of contented providers raises an issue: is there a class-based threshold for participation? Although peer economy providers do not typically perceive themselves as small business owners, they are not immune to the unpredictability common to small businesses. Many small businesses lose money in their early days, and many providers experience slow customer cycles before they develop a sense of seasonal fluctuations. If participation is meant to subsidize other pursuits or supplement existing income, then the drawn out return on investment might not bother that provider. However, if providers approach the peer economy as a full-income pathway, then the learning curve can inhibit those who do not have a financial buffer in the form of credit lines, adequate savings, or multiple household income earners.

This presents a real challenge when applied to the social welfare system. Cities and foundations that are interested in the peer economy focus on demographics that are “hardest to serve”—demographics that are disadvantaged often due to structural inequalities. As such, the majority of their constituents are on the lower end of the income spectrum. Some of these constituents may receive social welfare in the form of Medicaid or food benefits. Their children may qualify for Head Start early education programs and they may live in affordable or low-income housing. While these social welfare services are meant to help make ends meet, they have different income ceilings for their recipients. Once recipients move beyond that income level, they no longer qualify for that welfare program. Since it will take time for providers to become solvent and turn a profit, providers from this context may not make enough within a certain time window to compensate for the loss in welfare benefits (Seran and Canellakis 2014).

As an income generation template, the peer economy is a promising addition to other full-income schemas. Realistically, however, it is unclear whether providers can make a livable income from these platforms. Since many peer economy services require low human capital, critics speculate that peer-to-peer services will displace those who work in a similar capacity as employees (i.e.: hotel workers, administrative assistants, and designers). Critics also speculate that peer economy marketplaces will only further divide the haves and have-nots (Slee 2013, Horning 2014). Meanwhile, the growth in independent contracting shows no signs of stopping. The national count for full-time jobs has not returned to pre-recession level, and reported job growth tends to be restricted to low-wage or seasonal employment (Evangelist 2014). High wage jobs have not returned to pre-recession levels (Evangelist 2014), and only 23 percent of low-income employers offer health insurance (Claxton et al 2013). Perhaps as a symptom of the desperation for full

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<sup>5</sup> Companies have not unilaterally released these numbers, thereby fanning the commotion around the peer economy. However, Etsy and Airbnb have published some participation statistics as part of their impact reports. The statistics suggest that the majority of Etsy and Airbnb users are not full-income users (HR&A 2012, HR&A 2013, GfK 2013).



employment, criticism of the peer economy is most specific to the full-income use case.

Providers are a distinct constituency—people who share a common circumstance—but their independent contractor status leaves them little legal leverage with companies. Strikes and collective bargaining are signature tactics of traditional unions, but as their own boss, providers cannot unionize against companies. Providers could overcome these legal disadvantages if they commanded size and solidarity, but there are obstacles. First, providers are an atomized workforce. Many providers work independently in different settings, as drivers who are always on the move, as Taskers who assist with packing, moving, or other tasks, or as chefs in diners' personal kitchens. Providers also pick their own shifts and hours, which further discombobulate worker solidarity. Atomization presents challenges in organizing providers around their self-interest. Providers also vary in how useful they find peer economy platforms (Cheng 2014a). Full-income users have the most to gain from workforce solidarity. Although this swath of providers receives the most media attention, full-income users do not likely make up the majority of the provider population.

The results of splintered solidarity and varying self-interests are especially clear when it comes to regulatory representation. Regulators have set up “sting” operations, penalizing providers in order to get at companies. In 2014, New York’s Attorney General subpoenaed Airbnb for all of its New York City hosts’ prosecutable information—a total of 15,000 providers (Tam 2013). In Austin, Madison, and other cities, local law enforcement used the Uber and Lyft apps to order private cars, only to issue fines when drivers arrived (Truong 2014). To counter local government actions, some companies send out advocacy pleas in their newsletters (Stempeck 2014). In the regulatory shouting match, only two parties are fully represented: government and companies, and companies presume to speak in the interest of their providers. Since independent contractors are not employees, governments can only go after providers in order to send a message to companies. If providers—referred to as “business partners”—are assuming the liability and risk for which companies are not accountable, then providers are clearly a missing third voice in determining the legal future of the peer economy.



*In summer 2014, Uber sent a series of advocacy emails to their California user base. These emails included links to controversial legislation and contact information for state senators (Stempeck 2014).*

## Opportunities and promise: What can the peer economy do?

### a. Disrupting exploitative work systems

The peer economy represents significantly reduced barriers to reliable, independent income. As we have seen, this does not mean there are no barriers. However, just as Benkler pointed out that the cost of physical capital was once the central organizing principle around media broadcast, the cost of doing business has been the organizing principle around market entrance. Traditionally, individuals have been unable to enter the market for various reasons, including branding, product reach, equipment costs, permitting fees, acquiring checkout systems, and an unpredictable timeline to solvency. Taken together, participating in the market has been prohibitively expensive, and the cost to get started, alongside the risk, is too much of a gamble to casually try out a business idea.

Many people do not see self-employment as an option because the stakes are high and the safety net is thin. Instead, people often opt for work that offers immediate income and unemployment relief. This is visible in the New York City taxi industry, where the taxi and limousine commission keeps tabs on demographics, inspections, ridership, and geographic trends (New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission 2014a). Today, only 8% of NYC taxi drivers were born in the United States (Flegenheimer 2014). Driving is a low-value skill, and to become a taxi driver, the basic qualification is to know how to drive. Once potential drivers have passed background checks, they are certified in NYC to lease taxi shifts from medallion owners, which includes licensing fees,

vehicle use, brand affiliation, and insurance. Some states regulate taxis as a public utility<sup>6</sup>, and each locality manages its own medallion system (the way in which it assigns operational licenses). Medallion owners register one vehicle per medallion. Some localities do not have a limit on the number of medallions available for purchase and others have jurisdictional boundaries, where a taxi driver on one locality's medallion cannot pick up a passenger in another jurisdiction (even if, for example, a taxi drops off a passenger in another jurisdiction, that driver cannot subsidize the return trip by picking up a passenger in that jurisdiction). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, taxi drivers' mean annual wage, across the country, is \$25,200 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014).

There is a clear pathway to independent ownership in the taxi industry, and there are taxi drivers who aspire to run their own business. The ownership path varies from one locality to the next. In NYC, entrepreneurs start out as a taxi driver, saving enough or taking out loans to purchase a \$1 million medallion (New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission 2014b), and rent out shifts as a medallion owner. In Virginia, the upfront cost to become a self-employed driver or owner-operator is \$60,000. In this case, cab drivers enjoy the same flexibility as they would with a transportation network company. However, drivers' costs are much higher because of industry requirements and licensing fees, and dues for a taxi company's brand and dispatch service. Self-employed drivers who rent a company brand are often restricted to driving for only one company at a time, and if they leave, they are blacklisted by other companies (Excluded Worker Project 2013, Rothstein 2013). Meanwhile, the Union Cab Cooperative in Madison, Wisc. is a worker-owned taxi company that has been operating since 1979.

The taxi system can be exploitative, and the pathway to ownership perpetuates an exploitative cycle. There are differences among how medallion holders operate, but drivers generally start out owing money. Their take home pay is whatever remains after covering the cost of rental and gas, and whatever percentage a medallion owner may take of the profit (this is not true of every medallion). Shifts can last longer than a normal workday, and drivers cannot take off slow hours and redistribute them during busier times.

Meanwhile, drivers using TNC platforms such as Uber, Lyft, and SideCar choose when to work. If, at the start of a shift, business is slow, then TNC drivers may choose to sign off and start again at another time. There are many TNC drivers who use multiple driving apps simultaneously; they use two smartphones, one for Lyft and the other for Uber, and the first passenger request to come through is the one they will pick up. TNCs are not classified as a public utility, and this translates into greater flexibility for drivers; they are subject neither to jurisdictions nor bans on price gouging. In localities where it is difficult to hail a taxi due to low taxi frequency and availability, TNCs provide passengers with on-demand pickup. Which means that taxi drivers—for whom every shift is an uphill battle—are losing business<sup>7</sup>. To address this, Colorado has passed

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<sup>6</sup> Uber, Lyft, and other transportation network companies (TNCs) in California are regulated under the California Public Utilities Commission. Although these services are not categorized as public utilities (even though taxi services are), drivers are required to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), accommodating service pets, passengers in wheelchairs, and the blind. As public utilities, all taxi companies are required to comply with ADA. However, TNCs are not uniformly regulated across the U.S., and passengers with disabilities have a fraught relationship with these services. I attended a city commission hearing, where two disability advocates testified. One was blind, and she explained how TNCs increase her independence because she does not have to figure out the closest taxi stand, and the read back feature on smartphones meant that she did not have to rely on the driver's word that she was charged the correct amount. Even so, many TNC drivers have refused her transport because they think that her service dog is a personal pet, and they will not transport personal pets (Cheng 2014b). This is not uncommon; in Texas, disability advocates have filed suit against Uber, Lyft, and other transportation services in violation of ADA (Rosenthal 2014).

<sup>7</sup> According to one New York Times article, the standard shift for a NYC taxi driver is 12 hours—the amount of time it takes to earn enough to cover the daily lease (Flegenheimer 2014).

legislation that allows taxi companies to transition into a TNC model (Colorado Statute § 14-125, 2014). That being said, the TNCs are not immune to exploitative practices. Already, some long-term TNC drivers have joined together to build fleets and rent out vehicles to new drivers vetted by TNC platforms. Each fleet structures its fees differently, and the rental systems vaguely resemble NYC's medallion structure. While the fleet and medallion logistics might overlap, fleets have yet to prove exploitative (Anonymous interview with the author, August 2014). Fleets or no, medallion owners feel threatened. Even so, taxi drivers are reluctant to switch to TNCs because for some drivers, the old boss is the new boss: Independent contractors under some taxi companies and on all TNCs do not have a say in company policy or rates.

Although TNCs are still battling regulations, their existence may be enough for the taxicab industry in some localities to revisit their exploitative practices. For taxi companies without exploitative practices, TNCs may spur improvements in technology.

## **b. General consumption decreases, higher quality consumption increases**

Opportunity in the peer economy usually starts from the assumption that people already own something they can monetize. Yet as cost of living becomes harder to afford, peer-to-peer marketplaces may represent justification for major purchases. By example, Airbnb has helped people pay down their mortgage and rent, and afford small improvements that sat on the fix list for years. Participation makes it possible for some providers—older women, younger couples—to live independently (Cheng 2014a). For urbanites living in dire housing crises, it is a luxury to entertain the idea of home ownership. However, as a traditional milestone, home ownership is regarded as one of the smartest financial investments that individuals can make. There are many testimonies of how Airbnb and other platforms have been instrumental to providers' meaningful independence. Thus, as the peer economy matures, providers may factor in the potential for monetization into their acquisitions. It is conceivable that a young couple that wants to own a home might justify a costly mortgage because there are platforms like Airbnb. In San Francisco, carsharing company Getaround partnered with a Smart car dealership to waive the down payment for interested owners. In exchange, owners must rent out those cars on Getaround for 75% percent of each week (Lawler 2013).

## **c. Commerce as a challenge to homophily**

An early criticism of the peer economy, one that still lurks, is that it only attracted users who were young, white, well-educated, and middle-class. This criticism is based on anecdotal evidence, and some of the descriptors are no longer included in the criticism (i.e.: young). Between the simple income generation template and employment insecurity in the United States, the demographics of the peer economy are likely to change over time. The conversation has since evolved into concerns about class divide, and how the peer-to-peer aspect reinforces and aggravates tension between haves and have-nots. As the argument goes, creating new reasons for class warfare is hardly sharing, and these disingenuous terms take away from real sharing. Scholars who embrace concepts such as peer production and solidarity are the most eloquent in this defense. Real peer-to-peer looks like Wikipedia and open source platforms in which thousands of volunteers—sometimes anonymous—have come together to create something of great cultural importance. Real peer-to-peer is the thousands of protesters at Occupy Wall Street, collectively stretching out the movement's physical presence for much longer than anyone expected. Although they operate at a far more massive level, peer production overlaps with altruistic models such as tool libraries, community gardens, and many others listed at the start of this paper. Even though peer economy users cite sociability and personal philosophy as reasons for participation (echoing some of the

motivations in peer production), money changes the nature of interpersonal relationships. Thus the peer economy does not really emerge from the same spirit as peer production (Various research conversations with the author 2012-2014).

However, to use the peer production as a lens to evaluate the peer economy will result in blind spots. Existing research of well-known peer production platforms reveals that their volunteer bases are homogenous. Wikipedia is infamous for having a difficult time attracting women contributors (Wikimedia Foundation 2014); 90% of its contributors identify as male (Khanna 2012). Tapio Ikkala and Airi Lampinen's research has found that participants in gift-based network hospitality (i.e.: CouchSurfing) carefully select each other based on homophily (Ikkala and Lampinen, forthcoming). Housing cooperatives are a way to democratize wealth, and yet with "one member, one vote," the benefits of housing and community come at the cost of high emotional investment and attentiveness. The bigger the cooperative, the more that personal differences play into democratic processes and the more laborious consensus decisionmaking can become<sup>8,9</sup> (DeTar 2013). Without a monetary backbone, could it be that when factors of diversity are introduced into peer-to-peer systems, they compromise the system's scalability and success? Take, for example, Local Exchange Trading Schemes (LETS). LETS is a mutualistic model that peaked in the late 1990s, in which community members trade services. Individuals do not have to give to the person from whom s/he received, instead crediting the lender with currency that is redeemable for others' services. Participation is voluntary and nonbinding, and since all services are valued at the same level, there is no inherent value in accruing currency. LETS were praised as an economic development system. Explains researchers Theresa J. Aldridge and Alan Patterson, "LETS are intended to enable members to exchange labour, goods or services even if a lack of money would otherwise prevent them from trading." However, LETS never realized their potential (2002:371). Consider these excerpts from Aldridge and Patterson's research:

- ...the practical need for money constrains the use of LETS. The use of a local currency is normally restricted to the membership of the local scheme, thus the range of goods and services that can be purchased is necessarily limited. Very few essential requirements of life, such as food, housing or clothing, can be obtained through LETS.
- A number of interviewees who had sold goods and services found that they were unable to spend the [currency] that they had earned. ...[Says one interviewee,] "I'm probably in credit quite a bit, but I haven't really been able to use the services of someone to use up my [currency]. To me it's not money in the bank but it's like I haven't been able to make use of them. Now I don't think I'm going to get anything back for what I've sold."
- Those who required time-critical services, such as transport or child-care, could not be sure that their needs would be met in time through the LETS. (2002:376)

In general, interviewees were not opposed to generosity. However, LETS participants felt neither a base level of personal abundance nor the presence of well-matched reciprocity—commonly referred to as supply and demand.

The infusion of money may actually be key to bringing in demographics that might not otherwise participate in massively networked cooperative systems. In the absence of money, mutualistic

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<sup>8</sup> In personal conversations, both DeTar and I have heard anecdotal evidence and experience that the housing coop decisionmaking process can be so laborious that some of its members cannot justify the opportunity cost. Some members leave due to burnout, due to lack of time, and due to life changes that they feel are not compatible with the cooperative lifestyle.

<sup>9</sup> In reviewing common criticisms, DeTar shows that the intention around consensus decisionmaking is noble but blunt and, therefore, easily botched in implementation. His previous work has included design interventions for effective consensus decisionmaking.



participants are strongly aware of a social contract<sup>10</sup>. To a certain degree, money excuses people from having to socialize, and since platforms have instituted trust mechanisms, consumers do not need to vet providers as closely as they would in a gifting system. The gift economy demands intense engagement for socio-psychological reward, but that sort of reward may not be adequate, even for people who value generosity. People participate on peer-to-peer marketplaces because they need money. Money is a way for people to justify the opportunity cost in participation, and the socio-psychological rewards that follow become reinforcing factors for participation (Cheng 2014a).

#### **d. Access through distributed liquidity**

Traditional companies who do not deal in digital goods have to determine where to store or place their inventory. Hotel chains, ZipCar, rental companies, concierge services, all factor in location as part of their strategy. Higher traffic and commercial corridors will result in higher revenue, and companies want to maximize their opportunity. Therefore, there will be less retail and on-demand services in lower-income and marginalized neighborhoods. Meanwhile, peer economy companies deal in liquidity. Since they do not own the factors of production and fulfillment, inventory can live anywhere—wherever there are providers—and demand can be built over time. This liquidity makes it possible for some services to exist in neighborhoods that are normally considered commercially undesirable. While not true of all peer economy services, providers' geographic permanence can be a competitive advantage for groups like Getaround, which wants to make a rental car available every 0.2 miles (Murphy 2014), and Airbnb. In San Francisco, hotels are concentrated in the city center, and during conference season, hotels cannot keep up with the demand for occupancy. However, 72% of Airbnb rentals are outside of the city center, and with an infusion of tourists, local businesses outside of the city center may actually see an increase in revenue (HR&A 2012). Of course, this is not without its issues. In San Francisco, Airbnb has been the source of tension among landlords, renters, and would-be homeowners.

Some peer economy services may still be out of reach, but not as far as their traditional counterparts once were.

## **Conclusion**

The sharing economy is littered with fanciful criticisms and praise. Plenty of problems have been identified, yet they are often the target of criticism rather than intervention. The primer began by unpacking the “sharing economy” term. It then ran through peer economy actors and their motivations, suggesting that they form a distributed network with the potential to resolve and prevent many labor-related problems. It reviewed some of the challenges to worker solidarity and how they are rooted in outdated legislation. It laid out how structural inequality may keep disadvantaged constituencies from participating. It then presented several contentious issues, describing the oft-forgotten flipside to the peer economy—disrupting exploitative work systems, encouraging more thoughtful consumption, how the presence of money may actually make room for diversity, and how decentralized ownership can sometimes increase commercial services in marginalized neighborhoods.

Interventions in the peer economy will need to be a long-haul commitment. Regardless of whether the peer economy is a viable alternative model, stable work is less plentiful than in the past. The American workforce is moving toward a patchwork income, a portfolio of work, a gig economy—a term for every tier of optimism. Many possible interventions impact more than just

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<sup>10</sup> As the quip goes, “if you accept a dinner invitation, you have a moral obligation to be amusing.”

the peer economy. Revisiting twentieth century labor classifications is one place to start. The tension in the peer economy is differentiating between an independent entrepreneur who is planning to start a small business and an independent worker who just wants to earn independent income. As long as there is a penalty for plummeting from an employee to an independent contractor, the informal economy will become increasingly appealing to independent workers. Despite the legal risk in the informal economy, workers would avoid taxes and other costly fees that their low wages cannot bear.

As employers move away from providing benefits, there is a need for mutualistic systems that address work leave, retirement, and other basic benefits. Since work continues to move toward a patchwork income, it will fall upon people to help each other out (i.e.: we might draw inspiration from sick leave banks where people donate their unused sick days so that colleagues who must make a sudden departure can do so with pay) and support one another's endeavors through the way we consume goods. Freelancers Union considers this a necessary cultural shift and is a champion of "New Mutualism." In February 2014, Freelancers Union kicked off the Quiet Revolution, a campaign to encourage people "to spend your life, time, and money in ways that build something better for you and the people around you" (Horowitz 2014). To Freelancers Union, this looks like choosing a credit union over a bank chain, shopping at a local grocery instead of a supermarket. In short, it looks like supporting other collectives and people who are also trying to make it as independents, and growing a virtuous cycle of support.

When it comes to specific interventions around the peer economy, one of the first steps is to figure out the numbers: What percentage of providers uses just one platform? How active are they? What percentage of providers on specific platform types intends to earn an entire income? Knowing these answers, whether through research or urging company transparency, makes it possible for providers to organize strategically. Collective bargaining is a classic tactic, and knowing the numbers also makes it easier for providers to leverage their population size. As mentioned earlier in the paper, providers compete against incumbent companies and corporations who have streamlined production costs and passed savings on to customers. Meanwhile, providers compete with the same or lower price but without the benefit of economies of scale. Imagine what could be done with an organized constituency. Freelancers Union leveraged their constituency to procure lower health insurance rates, and the same could be done for bulk and wholesale equipment purchases.

Both the federal and local governments provide social welfare funding, and the local level administers benefits. This presents an opportunity for local governments to stretch out income caps so that their communities of concern, especially those on multiple welfare systems, are not penalized for helping themselves.

Finally, while the paper honed in on established groups such as Airbnb, Lyft and Uber, KitchenSurfing, Etsy, and others, peer economy startups are born everyday. Some of these founders are eager to be part of the sharing economy, not just for marketing purposes but because they are infatuated with the possibility of societal revolution. Seed-stage startups are particularly malleable, eager for credibility and support. Advocates who engage with the startup process can encourage good labor practices from the very beginning of a new business.

There are many more possibilities for building just labor systems and cultivating worker dignity and independence. A worthwhile peer economy will need creative interventions, government foresight in managing change (especially in transitioning from outdated regulations), and long-term commitment. Interventions will not only impact the peer-to-peer work model, they will pave the way for budding and as-yet unknown work models of the twenty-first century.



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The views and opinions expressed in this policy primer are solely those of the author(s). These views and opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Open Society Foundations.