Understanding public relations in the 'sharing economy'

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Abstract
In spite of the macro-economic impact of the so-called 'sharing economy' there is a nearly complete dearth of contributions from the communication academy to its discourse. More attention is overdue, particularly for the conceptual pressure the 'sharing economy' is exerting on the public relations function. The authors propose a reconceptualization of public relations by identifying the constitutive aspects of the sharing economy and bringing together the explanatory concepts 'circuits of commerce' and 'viable matches' from economic sociology and communicative constitution of organizations theory to develop the notions of 'deliberate disintermediation' and 'circuits of communication' in public relations. The contention is that by doing this, communicative acts not only contribute meaning in the sharing economy, but have economic value. Furthermore, the sharing economy poses challenges to the traditional forms of organizing public relations functions, but offers opportunities to realize different potential when public relations facilitates circuits of communication and becomes a meta-communicative competence embedded within the organization.

Keywords

Sharing economy
Public relations
Communicative Constitution of Organizations
Economic sociology
Organization

Highlights

- Constitutive elements of the 'sharing economy' put conceptual pressure on public relations
- Explanatory mechanisms from economic sociology enable an alternative reconceptualization
- Combined with the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) theory a new conceptualization of the role and function of public relations is possible
- Acts of communication can be seen not only to facilitate meaning, but to have economic value
- Public relations can be newly understood as a 'deliberatively disintermediated' function that enacts and reproduces 'circuits of communication' in the post-traditional economy

Understanding public relations in the 'sharing economy'

1. Introduction

The 'sharing economy' has been called an "idea that will change the world" (*Time*, 17 March 2011), constantly rising (*The Economist*, 7 March 2013) to become a "significant segment of […] future economic activity" (*New York Times, Economix Blog*, 3 March 2014) that is 'unstoppable' (*Forbes,* 13 January 2013). The latter is certainly true for the popular debate, the management discourse and the media attention dedicated to it. There is however, perhaps surprisingly, a nearly complete dearth of intellectual contributions from the communication academy to the discourse about the 'sharing economy'. More attention is overdue. The public relations industry in particular can be said to undergo intermediating change as a result of the 'sharing economy': Its core assets retain their value, but there is pressure on some of its core activities. The purpose of this paper is therefore to propose a reconceptualization of public relations and to describe the implications of the 'sharing economy' for its current practice.

2. The 'sharing economy'

Figures as well as anecdotes indicate the size of the 'sharing economy', a term that first entered the wider public discourse around 2012 (Martin, 2016): The market valuation, investment rounds or take-over bids for 'sharing economy'-businesses speak to the imagination, e.g. when Zipcar was acquired for $500 million. The total valuation of peer-to-peer business models is estimated to be $75 billion today and $335 billion by 2025 (Cadman, 2014; Matzler, Veider & Kathan, 2015). Uber and AirBnB in particular have made the transformation from start-up to multi-billion dollar valuations in less than 5 years (Lashinsky, 2015; Konrad & Mac, 2014). Didi Kuaidi, Uber's main rival in China, has raised nearly $2 billion in funding (Zarya, 2016). Thousands of other companies have been created in key sectors of mature economies (Owyang, Samuel & Grenville, 2014) thereby generating value from assets that wouldn't have been considered monetizable even just 5 years ago, e.g. time in, or seats on cars (with over 600 providers including Uber, Relayrides, Car2Go etc.), space (Airbnb), power drills (Zilok.com), cardboard boxes (UsedCardBoardBoxes.com), peer-to-peer credit (Zopa), home-repair skills (Airtasker, Taskrabbit), gardens (landshare.com), playdates for Asian children (kiddet.com), and cows (Kuhleasing.ch). A popular visualization, the 'Collaborative Economy Honeycomb' (Owyang, 2014), identifies the market sectors in which over 150 different business models are said to jointly constitute a coherent new industry: learning, municipal services, money, goods, health, space, food, utilities, transport, professional and corporate services. On top of these business models, the 'sharing economy' is also said to include dedicated financiers, national associations (e.g. ShareCo in the UK), and advocacy groups (e.g. OuiShare in France).

In spite (or because?) of the attention it receives, the 'sharing economy' is "a floating signifier for a diverse range of activities" (Schor et al., 2015: 13). There is neither a common understanding about which phenomena should be counted as 'sharing economy', nor an agreement if the term is the most suitable to describe the variety of these phenomena. Alternative terms and metaphors are in use, especially by scholarly authors, including 'collaborative consumption' (Belk, 2013; Botsman & Roger, 2010), 'mesh' (Gansky, 2010), 'commercial sharing systems' (Lamberton & Rose, 2012) , crowd-based capitalism (Sundarajan, 2016), and 'access-based consumption' (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012).

3. The 'sharing economy' in communication discourse

More attention from the communication academy is overdue, not primarily because of the scope of the 'sharing economy', but because of the disruption that other scholarly disciplines forecast for the entire eco-system that comprises value-creation, symbolic interaction and the communicative formation of communities. Even after discounting the often unreflexively enthusiastic hyperbole found in public media, the 'sharing economy's' impact is seldom described as incremental, but instead as a seismic shift toward "alternative ways of consuming and new business paradigms" (Belk 2013: 1599; Miller, 2016), or as an 'economic groundswell' as important as the industrial revolution (Botsman & Rogers, 2010); its mixture of post-traditional social innovations and more traditional extractive modes of business has engendered visions of renewed forms of collective urban life (Morgan & Kuch, 2015; Seyfang & Smith, 2007) and even of transformed market economies that will globally pivot toward sustainability (Cohen & Kietzmann, 2014; Martin, 2016). A nascent coordinated market economy is said to point to the existence of a variety of alternative capitalist forms (Dyal-Chand, 2015), in which boundaries (and their definitions) are challenged between public and private institutions, economic and social spheres, production and consumption, as well as between organizations, their constituents and their stakeholders.

We propose that this impact on the definition and on the spanning of boundaries between organizations, communities and businesses also puts conceptual pressure on public relations, itself hitherto understood as a boundary-defining and –spanning function. Using the most prevalent taxonomy of how industries evolve (McGahan, 2000), the public relations industry can be said to undergo intermediating change as a result of this conceptual pressure: Its core assets (skills, knowledge and abilities) retain their value, but some of its core activities are threatened with obsolesence. “The challenge under intermediating change is to find ways to preserve knowledge […] and other valuable assets while fundamentally changing relationships with customers and suppliers” (McGahan, 2004: 2).

Public relations is exposed to the pressure of the ‘sharing economy’ of needing to simultaneously be both inclusive as well as competitive. ‘Sharing economy’ ventures, in spite of their communal nature and open organization, are also as aggressively competitive as the closed corporate entities of the ‘traditional’ economy, likewise trying to distinguish themselves in their markets with – among other things – forms of traditional public relations campaigns for which they promptly become criticized (Heylighen, 2016; Swant, 2015]. Their communication efforts are torn in two directions when designed to sustain ventures that are both ‘genuinely collaborative’ as well as ‘hotly competitive’ (Schor et al. 2015: 13).

A second conceptual pressure is that while non-centralized communication enables the trust, the relationships, the communities and the transactions inside ‘sharing economy’ ventures, their very lack of a centralized, hierarchical entity also exposes them to explicit distrust from those on the outside of their communities. 'Sharing economy'-ventures are often blamed for transferring risks to consumers, the casualization of labour, the lack of concern for the environment and the avoidance of taxes. In response, they engage in traditional forms of lobbying, for which again they receive higher scrutiny than traditional firms (e.g. Ford, 2015; Slee, 2016; Sundarajan, 2016). A reconceptualized public relations will therefore also need to reflect this second pressure – one between openness and distinction (Schor et al., 2016: 66) - that it has in common with the 'sharing economy' as a whole, caught in the contradiction between a 'pathway to sustainability' and a 'nightmarish form of neoliberalism' (Martin, 2016: 212).

Thirdly, while public relations in the 'sharing economy' – both between peers constructing a community, as well as on behalf of a 'sharing economy' venture establishing its competitiveness – may intend to be strategic, its outcomes are never going to be completely isomorphic with the intentions of its participants. Instead, the outcome of public relations attempts will always be as much the product of those who are deemed performing it, as of their peers attending to such a communicative performance. Ambiguity and indeterminacy among peers and communities are the outcome of public relations in the 'sharing economy', irrespective of its unambiguous intent (Seo & Creed, 2002; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen & Clark, 2011).

Current mainstream public relations research is not equipped to provide such a reconceptualization of public relations in the 'sharing economy', nor one that incorporates the three conceptual and pragmatic pressures described above. This is mostly because the organization as entity and agent remains its prevalent unit of analysis, as inspired by the excellence study (e.g. Grunig, 2006), which still is the dominant paradigm for the field (Botan & Hazleton, 2009; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006). This dominance has invited considerable scholarly push-back, usually by critical and/or postmodern scholars (Demetrious, 2013; Gower, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2000; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Motion & Weaver, 2005) and by those espousing a co-creational approach (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Nevertheless, as most recently described by Macnamara (2016: 255), the organization-as-entity standpoint is "explicitly evident in contemporary writing by PR scholars" and also "literature on measurement and evaluation supports the argument that […] PR is primarily undertaken to achieve the objectives of the […] organization" (Macnamara, 2014). In practice too, the public relations function is not so much co-creational but a function used to create agency for an organization in the management of its relationships (Argenti, 2009; Arthur W. Page Society, 2015).

Seen through this dominant organizational lens, public relations is tasked with 'reification' (Prinz, 2012): the creation of entities that have perceived coherence, stability, and agency in handling their stakeholders, i.e. making and owning managerial choices about all their stakeholder-oriented actions (which Uber and AirBnB famously reject whenever passengers are threatened by drivers, or people unexpectedly recognize their dining rooms in x-rated movies). Such organizational reification runs counter to the 'sharing economy', because it overlooks the constructedness of business ventures as social entities (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). This is particularly valid for ventures in the 'sharing economy': they are both businesses as well as collaborative constructions of social entities and remain constantly in flux. They aspire neither to the reification of traditional corporations, nor to their agency. They moreover challenge both of these aspirations when inviting their participants to transact, co-create and constitute a community all at the same time.

Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) contend that any concept of public relations would benefit from understanding "how communication organizes [. . .] rather than the traditional focus on the organization of communication" (2011, p. 384). Communication should be considered as constitutive of institutions (Cornelissen et al., 2015), since these emerge from and are recursively implicated by communication, including public relations.

At this stage it is worth brief briefly explaining the theoretical perspective behind Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) and Cornelissen et al's (2015) statements above. The field of enquiry known as the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) has gained increasing attention in organizational communication studies and more widely (Ashcraft, Kuhn & Cooren, 2009; Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud & Taylor, 2014; Cooren, et al, 2011; Cornelissen et al, 2015). Simply put, organizations can be seen as an entity (Grunig, 2006) or as a process (Taylor, 2011). It is the process of communication that lies at the heart of CCO ontology. It addresses fundamental questions such as: How does an organization become an organization? How does it continue even though its membership changes? When does it cease to be an organization? CCO theory embraces a broad church of research agendas and while there is general agreement that it focuses on 'how organizations as discursive-material configurations are reproduced and coproduced through ongoing interactions' (Brummans et al., 2014), there are different approaches and theorizing around how communication is seen as intrinsic to the act of organizing and the realization of organizations. However, as Cornelissen (et al., 2011) put it

> "[T]he general claim is that if communication is indeed constitutive of organizations, it cannot be considered to be simply one of the many factors involved in organizing, and it cannot be merely the vehicle for the expression of pre-existing 'realities'; rather it is the means by which organizations are established, composed, designed, and sustained. Consequently, organizations can no longer be seen as objects, entities or 'social facts' inside of which communication occurs. Organizations are portrayed instead, as ongoing and precarious accomplishments realized, experienced, and identified primarily – if not exclusively – in communication processes." (p. 1150).

At the heart of CCO theory is the notion of the co-creation of meaning, although there is ongoing debate about the boundaries of the symbolic and the material (Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren, 2009).

In this paper, we are taking three steps toward understanding public relations in the post-traditional economy: we will first identify the characteristics that are relevant for an insertion into the scholarly communication discourse; we secondly propose an explanatory mechanism that straddles society and economy, on the basis of which a reconceptualization of public relations can take place; finally, we propose such a reconceptualization and provide a new model which illustrates this graphically. We conclude with the implications for the practice in both traditional as well as post-traditional organizations.

4. Constitutive characteristics of the 'sharing economy'

The 'sharing economy' provides temporary access (as opposed to permanent ownership) to otherwise idle resources (as opposed to resources specifically activated for the transaction). Producers capitalize the unused capacity of things they own and consumers rent access to those things rather than acquiring ownership from a company or producer. Stephany (2015: 205) describes this as "the value in taking under-utilised assets and making them accessible online to a community, leading to a reduced need for ownership". Botsman and Rogers (2010a,b) distinguish three subtypes of such temporary access: product service systems, in which goods that are privately owned can be rented or shared between peers; redistribution markets, in which second-hand goods are moved to someone that – contrary to their original owner – needs them; and collaborative lifestyles in which mostly local communities exchange skills and services. The dynamic behind all forms of such temporary access is inherently economical: the cost of sharing idle resources is less than owning them, both for the individual homo oeconomicus (Heylighen, 2016; Lamberton & Rose, 2012) (because a new abundance of supply and the algorithmic efficiency of connecting it with demand will put pressure on prices) as well as for the social and natural environment (Winterhalter, Wecht & Krieg, 2015) (because overproduction of goods will decrease), thus also raising the hope of a sustainable form of capitalism (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Daunoriene et al., 2015; Lowitt, 2011; Martin, 2016).

A second constitutive element of the 'sharing economy' is what we propose to call 'deliberate disintermediation': This is not equivalent to the complete removal of third parties from the transactions between producers, consumers or any other members of a community. Such complete disintermediation is what many successful 'sharing economy' ventures exaggeratingly claim (Gellman, 1996; Hoover & Lee, 2015). However, a complete bypassing is actually very rare in the 'sharing economy' and is therefore neither a constitutive (Walters, 2008; Dutta, Sarmah & Goyal, 2010), nor even a novel characteristic (the parents of one of the authors still reminisce about the white common-pool bicycles – '*witte fietsen'* – in Amsterdam of the 1960s).

We propose that 'deliberative disintermediation' describes the much more prevalent negotiated reduction of the number and the value of links dominated by a central institution and the simultaneous strengthening of links between the members of a community (Nordin, Brozovi & Holmlund, 2013). At AirBnB, for example, the central brand continues to provide the infrastructure necessary to sustain the sharing community and charges a minimal fee from each transaction for doing so. Rather than being a fully disintermediated pool, in which participants pitch in and – at other times – take resources, these business models are 'network-generalized exchanges' (Sohn & Leckenby, 2007) in which, enabled by an infrastructure, individuals take part in a series of exchanges with each other.

In research done with a technological backdrop, the sharing-enabling communication technology is often equated pars-pro-toto with the 'sharing economy' as a whole (e.g. Wosskow, 2014). However, we instead contend that communication technology and online infrastructure have only made the grand scale of 'deliberative disintermediation' possible and are therefore a third constitutive element of the 'sharing economy', but not identical to it. Communication software reduces entry barriers to markets and gives direct access to productive tools and to the community that wants to receive them (Hoover & Lee, 2013). The software and its algorithms have drastically reduced the cost of 'deliberative disintermediation' because they are based on self-regulation mechanisms that incur minimal labor costs. Asset owners and renters use these 'highly intelligent mediators' (Heylighen, 2016: 4) at a cost that no traditional third-party, or full intermediary could match. At the same time, the software is both a business infrastructure, as well as a social assurance structure that performs the production of generalized trust among the participants of the community (Richardson, 2015).

5. An explanatory mechanism connecting communities and business

Research abounds about how individual market transactions have been changed by online platforms, like Taobao, or Craigslist. These studies usually focus on new products and services transacted digitally (Kitchin, 2014; Wilson, 2012), on the dyadic constellation between two transacting peers (e.g. Guttentag, 2015; Schor et al., 2015), on the monetary risks they are exposed to (Bonson Ponte et al., 2015), and on the role that trust and reputation play in their navigation between risk and reward (Resnick & Zeckhauser, 2002; Lauterbach et al., 2009; Rosen, Lafontaine & Hendrickson, 2011; Sparks & Browning, 2011;Yacouel & Fleischer, 2012).

Barely included in these investigations of e-commerce are multipolar relationships, let alone the complex link between social communities and their value-creating transactions that together constitute the ‘sharing economy’. Additional exploration is especially needed into the multiple, communication-enabled connections between virtual and material communities (Dodge, Kitchin & Zook, 2009; Kinsley 2013, 2014; Kitchin & Dodge, 2011; Zook & Graham, 2007), where the ‘sharing economy’ is simultaneously commercial and communal. These communities create the conditions for business transactions that in turn reproduce their communal nature. At AirBnB, for example, both clients and service providers will self-identify as ‘travellers’ and thus, through a variety of communicative measures, construct a community, whose members they purport to be irrespective of their commercial exchanges (Ert, Fleischer & Magen, 2016).

Management and economic discourse has a blind spot for the fact that the business transactions of the ‘sharing economy’ are performed through peers’ similar understanding of community (Richardson, 2015). The social sciences can overcome this managerial blind spot by providing the necessary insight into the communicative construction of communities, into the connection between offline communities and the online sphere (Hersberger, Murray, & Rioux, 2007; Sohn & Leckenby, 2007), and into the new socio-technical abilities of individuals to construct their own social communities (Carrasco et al., 2008; Hopkins et al., 2004;

Wellman et al., 2003). However, the social sciences, including the communication academy, have a blind spot themselves and have insufficiently investigated the business implications that are interwoven with communicative community building.

More in-, and conclusive investigations of the ‘sharing economy’ require a paradigm that straddles both the economic as well as the social. Only such a more inclusive paradigm would, we propose, allow the communication academy to respond to the conceptual pressure that the ‘sharing economy’ puts on public relations, itself a function that has straddled commerce and community, organizations and stakeholders even before the advent of the ‘sharing economy’.

As first argued by Schor et al. (2016) in a different context, economic sociology (Granovetter & Swedberg, 2011; Krippner, 2001; Portes, 2010; Zelizer, 2007) promises to provide such a paradigm, as its units of analysis are relationships that exist outside of traditional markets, but that nevertheless perform economic value creation. It is a field that “bubbles with an exciting spectrum of alternative explanations for economic activity” (Zelizer, 2012: 146). Particularly its metatheoretical assumption of ‘embeddedness’ is a valid starting point for describing the ‘sharing economy’: any “economic action of individuals as well as larger economic patterns […] are very importantly affected by networks of social relationships” (Swedberg, 1990: 100).

We more specifically propose that economic sociology’s explanatory mechanism of ‘circuits of commerce’ (Parrenas, 2000; Velthuis, 2005; Zelizer, 2007, 2010) can help to reconceptualize public relations in the ‘sharing economy’, especially when it is paralleled with CCO. Circuits of commerce are business and economic entities that are neither corporations, organizations, defined networks, nor hierarchies.

Circuits of commerce consist of relationships that are contingent, fluid and emergent, reproducing their communities in which economic transactions are permanently negotiated between peers. Examples (before the advent of the ‘sharing economy’) are the communities enabling and performing the fine art market, time banks, and crypto-currencies (Schor et al., 2016). Zelizer (2012) explains that ‘viable matches’ between peers interweave economic transactions with communal relationships thus forming a circuit of commerce. These viable matches sustain relationships while also getting “the economic work […] done” (Zelizer, 2010: 153). The number of viable - relative to failed - matches indicates the robustness of a circuit of commerce. Zelizer (2004) further explains that circuits of commerce can apply to different forms of transactions which can range from the intimate (arrangement for the personal care of dependent individuals) to the impersonal (an exchange transaction of commodity goods for a token within a group of peers who place equivalent value on that token).

According to Zelizer (2004), who coined the phrase, any circuit of commerce has four features:

1. a well-defined boundary exists with some control over transactions crossing the boundary
2. a distinctive set of transfers of goods, services, or claims upon them occurs within the ties between participants
3. those transfers employ distinctive media
4. ties among participants have some shared meaning

5. A reconceptualization of public relations for the ‘sharing economy’

Taking the three steps towards understanding public relations in the post-traditional economy outlined in section 3, we can now make some observations that will help us re-conceptualize public relations for this new era.

5.1 Characteristics of the sharing economy that are relevant for an insertion into the scholarly communication discourse

The first characteristic of the sharing economy identified under this heading is the notion of temporary access to otherwise idle resources is important. As will be seem below, we articulate the notion of public relations becoming an embedded meta-competence in organizations. Communication is something that all members (defined not only as those employed, but also all those who enact its purpose and comment on it) should be enabled, equipped, trained (where possible) and encouraged to do. The communicative competence of these members will not be employed constantly, but as and when there is a desire or a need for them as determined either by themselves, or by those that organize them.

A key element of this communication meta-competence is that it not only has constitutive value, and it is not only concerned with co-producing meaning, but it has economic and social value too. Conversations with potential and actual customers, regulators, distributors, suppliers and others with a financial stake help stimulate loyalty, create opportunities for collaboration, generate advocates, provides early warning of issues and problems, generates opportunities to act positively when there is a crisis and so on. More generally it provides opportunities for the creation of a commonly understood organizational narrative (what CCO scholars call 'text') about the organization which could be interpreted as an understanding of the brand – which certainly has economic value (Druckman, 2016). That narrative may have the power to become influential or even dominant which again generates more economic return.

The social or societal value communication creates arises from those incidental and purposive conversations that are around matters of interest with no direct monetary value. Of course, these discussions could characterize the central discourse between NGOs and Governments and their discussants, but also constitutes the stuff of 'social talk' between organizations and organizing whether that be general chit chat, discussions about sport, politics or the weather. Such conversations are important because they thicken social bonds, develop connectedness, provide opportunities for listening about broader concerns and generate social capital more broadly.

The second characteristic identified under this heading is what we have called 'deliberate disintermediation'. This is the partial, but planned disintermediation of third parties from transactions between suppliers and consumers. In the 'sharing economy' the third party such as Uber and AirB&B seek to minimize their role, providing a mainly technological architecture for contact and payment and some setting of the 'rules', but they take out resources. The lessons for public relations here is pertinent. The function needs to step away from the gate-keeping and protectionist stance that it has traditionally taken, partly because it has felt the need to establish professional boundaries. Rather it has the opportunity to regard itself as a facilitating function, equipping other organizational members with the capabilities to communicate well, largely at the tactical level. The resource it gets in return is intelligence and information and a freeing of time to undertake more strategic thinking about the developing narrative (in the broadest sense of that word – including evolving purpose, resource allocation, design of systems, processes, architectures, as well as communication based narratives) of the organization.

Linked to this, the third characteristic under this heading, an underpinning IT infrastructure, has obvious outworkings. This goes beyond identifying the tools of communication such as web-based and mobile technologies, to the sophisticated use of conversation tracking technologies, analysis and evaluation and archiving and curation. This includes the use of big data.

5.2. An explanatory mechanism connecting communities and business

We believe the Zelizer's (2004, 2007, 2010) 'circuits of commerce' provides us with a sufficiently robust blueprint for the communication academy to reconceptualize public relations in the 'sharing economy'. Although the mapping across is not perfect, it allows for a reconceptualization of public relations by expanding its function from traditional reification to also include the enabling of viable matches, the generation of robustness of circuits of commerce, and the support of their economic performance.

Looking at the four features of a circuit of commerce it is possible to see how public relations can use this blueprint to understand its role in the sharing economy.

First, the need to define boundaries will remain, but organizing rather than organization will come to the fore as organizational form changes. Typically 'sharing economy' organizations are small both in terms of the number of people working for them and their location. The core business however, is organizing since they broker the interactions between parties. Once ‘organized’ those people participating then enact the purpose of the sharing organization. That these transactions have to be organized indicates control across a boundary – the organization controls the entry point into being organized. The organizing process is brokered through communication – usually on-line.

A key question to be asked however, is what does ‘organization’ mean in the ‘sharing economy’? We would contend that stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) still provides a clue, however the articulation will be different. Not only does the circle of those who the organization affects or who affect it grow wider and wider, they become increasingly difficult to define and are far more fluid and dynamic than traditional stakeholder groups. They are intrinsic to the organization as they enact its purpose and they move between various circuits as they become in turn consumer, supplier, commentator and so on. Indeed they self-define as they move from one circuit to another with ease using the enabling capabilities of technology to do so. The traditional stakeholder maps (as exemplified in figure 1), with the organization at the center and stakeholder groups having discrete labels, will not hold, not that they ever did. For example, it has long been the case that the boundaries between the internal and the external are dissolving and the ‘sharing economy’ is just a more extreme example.

Insert figure 1 (single-column, black & white) about here

Drawing from CCO theory, it will be the act of communication itself that will define communities, circuits of commerce, organizations and organizing along with the topics about which that communication occurs. Those conversations will take place among self-selecting internal and external groups, whose membership can be permanent or temporary, and who will participate in conversations or ‘transactions’ that are of interest to them. Thus the topic of conversation (whether that be offers to supply, acceptance of service and commentaries in, on or about the service and/or organization) become the ‘goods’ that are transferred in the circuit of commerce (second feature of a circuit of commerce) and the mechanism through which the conversation takes place becomes the distinctive media (feature three of the circuit of commerce).

Thus, in the ‘sharing economy’ the fourth feature of circuits of commerce becomes very important. What are the shared meanings that are generated? There are two aspects to this. Firstly, in practical terms there needs to be a shared understanding of the nature of the transaction or transfer being enacted. What precisely is being exchanged and what are the expectation, rights and responsibilities on either side of the transaction? At AirBnB it is clearly not part of the understood bargain that renting out a house to a peer also entitles them to use it to make pornographic films.

Second, what does it mean to be part of a circuit that is constituted through communication? It is our argument that opportunities are created for viable matches where communal relationships are developed around conversations of common interest. These matches allow these communities to become self-sustaining whether or not organizations participate at any one time. Furthermore, as the conversations that are held about the organization become more multi-layered and range seamlessly between the personal and the impersonal, the interwovenness of the narrative that develops and the ties that are created become so deep that they are increasingly difficult to unpick or counter.

Third, as indicated in 5.1. these circuits also have economic value. It is not just meaning that is generated, but (albeit not exclusively) financial gain.

Borrowing from CCO theory and marrying it with Zelizer’s circuits of commerce, we now introduce the notion of ‘circuits of communication’. Organizations as constituted through communication in the sharing economy (and even in traditional organizations who have to respond to the IT revolution) become effectively circuits of communication, where multiple groups hold conversations that define them and which not only co-produce meaning, but also have commercially viability. This is graphically illustrated at Figure 2 , *Insert Figure 2 here. (double-column, black & white) about here*

5.3 Re-conceptualizing the role of the public relations function

If organizations are defined by circuits of communication whose participants are as likely to be 'ordinary members of staff' and those which whom they converse, what then is the role of the professional public relations function?

One future would be that it becomes totally redundant, with no gate-keeping role and no reason for recognition of its professional expertise because it is within the power of everyone to become a proficient and present communicator. An alternative that we propose is to become the holder of the ring in the circuit: an expert who communicates about communication. Internally this means becoming a coach and mentor about best practice and establishing common meaning based on agreed purpose, values and a shared culture. In essence this entails setting the conditions for effective communication so that viable matches are made between peers, but not undertaking the actual communication itself. In doing so, the function helps a circuit of communication which allows the organization to put a boundary around itself defined by the types of conversations its own members have internally which will have their own unique character: one circuit of communication.

Done well this also has effects outside of 'boundaries' because the nature of conversations between its formal members will characterize the conversations they have with others. They will both initiate and join other circuits of communication where there are opportunities for viable matches and where shared meaning and/or economic value exists or can be created. They may also encounter dissonance (opposition or a crisis) which will require the assistance of other circuits to gain understanding or support, or indeed lead to a re-calibration of the internal circuits as listening is internalized.

The central function of public relations will also entail identifying the various circuits of communication by looking for those where the organization or circuit of commerce is under discussion, or where there are opportunities for conversations, for example around common values. Where the viable matches are present there are opportunities to build communities. Where there is dissonance, more traditional approaches to conciliation, conflict resolution or agreement to disagree may be required.

This transformation in role means that public relations becomes a meta-communicative function communicating about communication rather than undertaking the communication itself. In doing so it not only undertakes deliberative disintermediation, but achieves one of its long prized goals: to become an embedded meta-competence within the organization.

7. Conclusion

The public relations academy has been slow in providing a contribution to the debate on the ‘sharing economy’. This paper has offered a way forwards based on an identification of those aspects of the ‘sharing economy’ that have particular pertinence for the public relations academy, and by combining thinking drawn from economic sociology and CCO theory. Circuits of commerce provide a model that can be used to see how public relations can provide an architecture of circuits of communication which become part of a sustaining mechanism where communication is constitutive and has economic potential. The discussions in, through and about the organization through circuits of communication become the basis of how they are defined and valued. The match between the two concepts is not perfect, but this paper opens the door to economic sociology, a potentially rich area of comparison and cooperation between fields of study.

The paper has just introduced the potential utility of using circuits of communication as a basis for re-conceptualizing public relations and this brief introduction throws up a number of unanswered questions and areas for further research:

- A fuller exploration of the similarities/differences between circuits of commerce and circuits of communication
- A more developed conceptualization of circuits of communication

- An examination of the implications of this model for a societal view of public relations as opposed to an organization focused view
- An examination of other insights that economic sociology can bring to the field.

Further work on the reconceptualization of public relations proposed here is therefore overdue. It will require the profession to move away from its traditional 'comfort zone' in which the main source of revenue and activity for public relations is the creation of entity and agency through 'content' as the current orthodoxy has it (Macnamara, 2015). This reconceptualization predicates a smaller profession. However, it also releases professionals from the tactical role of functionary to undertake the strategic role of architect of and advisor to circuits of communication. In the above conceptualization - where communication is constitutive for organizations, commerce, communities and circuits alike - there cannot be a more important strategic role.

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