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The Sharing Economy: Myths and Realities

Edited by

Anders HENTEN, Denis LESCOP,
Jean Paul SIMON & Bruno SORIA

- Lobbying as Rhetorical Framing in the "Sharing Economy": a case study on the limits and crisis of the Evidence Based Policy Paradigm
- Platforms at the Heart of New Form of Labour
- The Rise and Fall of Take Eat Easy, or Why Markets are not Easy to Take in the Sharing Economy
- More generous for small favour? Exploring the Role of Monetary and Pro-Social Incentives of Daily Ride Sharing Using a Field Experiment in Rural Île-de-France



Interviews

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Dossier

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Lobbying as Rhetorical Framing in the "Sharing Economy": a Case Study on the Limits and Crisis of the Evidence Based Policy Paradigm

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Abstract: This paper critically discusses the "sharing economy", highlighting the conceptual ambiguity and the rhetorics that characterise this emerging phenomenon and the regulatory and policy disputes that have arisen around it. The paper considers both consumption oriented platforms and platforms intermediating labour and identify a number of rhetorical narratives that are then contrasted with the available empirical evidence. It shows that the debates on the sharing economy are characterised by value disputes, uncertain facts, high stakes and the need of urgent decision; despite the lack of robust evidence, rhetorical discourses are used by powerful concentrated interests for lobbying based on a convenient framing of the policy agenda. As decisions on regulation are taken or not taken in conditions of scientific uncertainty and under the framing implemented by concentrated interests, the paper argues that the approach of policy makers and regulators to the sharing economy exemplifies vividly the crisis of the Evidence Based Policy paradigm.

Key words: sharing economy, lobbying, rhetorical framing, interest groups, evidence based policy

We are being afflicted with a new disease of which some readers may not yet have heard the name, but of which they will hear a great deal in the years to come--namely, technological unemployment. This means unemployment due to our discovery of means of economising the use of labour outrunning the pace at which we can find new uses for labour.

John Maynard KEYNES, "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren" (1930, p. 360)¹

¹ From John Maynard KEYNES, *Essays in Persuasion*, New York: W.W.Norton & Co., 1963 (orig. ed. 1930), pp. 358-373.

The "online platform economy" has reached sizeable dimensions and today is very policy relevant and a hotly debated topic. A recent study commissioned by the European Commission (henceforth EC), for instance, has estimated that as many as almost 200m European citizens have used peer-to-peer platforms between May 2015 and May 2016 (HAUSEMER *et al.*, 2017). The platform economy is discussed both as a source of innovation/growth and as a matter of various policy concerns (competition, consumers' protection, privacy, algorithms transparency, etc.). According to an *ad hoc* issues of the Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2016c), many European citizens report to be concerned about consumers' rights and the lack of transparency on the way platforms function. In the Digital Single Market (DSM) strategy the EC announced an in depth review of platforms (European Commission, 2015a, 2015b), which translated in a number of initiatives including, among other things, the e-commerce package², the Communication on Online Platform (European Commission, 2016b), and the Communication on the Collaborative Economy (European Commission, 2016a); several European countries also took action in this domain³. The "sharing economy", or alternatively termed "collaborative economy", allegedly represents a specific segment of the online platform economy deserving a separate treatment; although we will show that such distinctiveness is very arguable at least from some of the platforms labelled as "sharing". One particular concern, that regards all online platforms but specifically those intermediating new forms of work, regards the alleged advent of technological unemployment predicted in the quotation from Keynes placed at the beginning of this article. The rise of online labour platforms, in fact, is occurring at the same time as many gurus predict the widespread computerisation and robotisation of jobs.

² The e-commerce package contains, among other things, the legislative proposal 2016/0152 (COD) on geo-blocking and the legislative proposal 2016/0148 (COD) concerning unfair commercial practices in the digital world.

³ For instance:

- a) In 2015, the French government promoted the Digital Republic Bill, with the objectives of opening up data and knowledge dissemination, ensuring equal rights for internet users, and promoting an inclusive digital society.

<http://www.republique-numerique.fr/pages/digital-republic-bill-rationale>

- b) In 2016, the Italian parliament drafted the Sharing Economy Act

<http://www.camera.it/dati/leg17/lavori/stampati/pdf/17PDL0039770.pdf>

- c) The Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs commissioned a study to identify and evaluate policy options for online platforms

<https://www.tno.nl/en/about-tno/news/2016/3/how-policy-makers-can-deal-with-digital-platforms/>

- d) In Germany, the Ministry of Economics has published a Green Book on Digital Platforms outlining rules and framework conditions for online platforms, while the Competition Authority has carried out an analysis of online market structures.

At face value the "sharing economy" seemed a new and refreshing movement where social and public inspired passions could be reconciled with economic self-interest, exactly in the way that Albert HIRSCHMAN had argued (1977, 1982) in his attempt to rebuke the pessimism implicit in Mancur OLSON work on collective action (1971 [1965]). HIRSCHMAN challenged both those who saw the self as a utility-maximizing machine and the communitarian thinkers longing for a world without consumer avarice and the quest for lucre. In this view the passions and interests were counterpoints that integrated each other. Platforms born to share and also produce some utility seemed the realization of such vision. Yet, starting at least from 2014 these platforms have become the object of "sharing wars" (RAUCH & SCHLEICHER, 2015), where the passion of "true sharing" has been pitted against the "interests" of big commercial platforms. Most radical critiques argue that large platforms have hijacked the founding narrative of the sharing movement to pursue their own economic interests through traditional lobbying strategies (LEE, 2015; SCHOR, 2015; WALKER, 2015). Indeed, as we will argue taking inspiration from another seminal work by HIRSCHMAN (1991a), rhetorical framing is an essential part of the ongoing policy debates and conflicts surrounding the "sharing economy".

Conceptual ambiguity and rhetorics surround the "sharing economy" and, in the midst of value disputes and lack of evidence, policy and regulatory decisions are taken "in the dark" often under the influence only of some interest groups; in many cases it seems that politicians and policy makers have abdicated to their role and are mute while courts and judges pronounce their judgements on whether Uber drivers are contractors or employees and on other matters. In this contest, one is led to wonder what has happened to the principles and goals of the Evidence Based Policy (henceforth EBP) paradigm. As a matter of fact, it is our claim, the "sharing economy" is one among the many policy domains that are bringing to the fore the intrinsic limitations and crisis of the crudely positivistic and technocratic nature of such a paradigm. The EBP was launched as part of the programme of New Labour in Blair's Britain (Cabinet Office, 1999), but rapidly spread beyond UK (NUTLEY *et al.*, 2010); as noted (HEAD, 2013) p. 397, most policy makers adhered swiftly to the EBP mantra since policy making based on ignorance, opportunism, and vested interested is not "readily admitted". While there is hardly anything new in the programme of using evidence for policy (BOGLIACINO *et al.*, 2015; MISURACA *et al.*, 2013; PAWSON & TILLEY, 1997; VEDUNG, 2010), the main peculiarity of the EBP paradigm is its unrealistic ambition to eliminate any ideological element and judgements from the formulation of policies, and to curb the discretion of professionals

(i.e. teachers, field workers, policy officers, etc.). Indeed, it has been criticised as a sort of new "rationality project" to expel politics from policy making that consider democratic processes as rent-seeking and a deadweight loss to society (KAY, 2011). Increasing criticisms to EBP include authors turning it on its head and arguing that what is happening in practice is "Policy Based Evidence Making" (PBEM) as a form of misuse of evidence in policy making (SANDERSON, 2011; STRASSHEIM & KETTUNEN, 2014; TORRITI, 2010). The EBP paradigm has been under serious reconsideration also within the European Commission not least for the controversy that has surrounded first the establishment and then the discontinuation of the post of Chief Scientific Advisor (CSA)⁴.

This paper, selectively drawing on various analyses presented elsewhere⁵, discusses the "sharing economy" and the regulatory and policy disputes surrounding it, as a case in point in the crisis and limits of the EBP paradigm. Section 2 presents our theoretical framework, whereas Section 3 illustrates the main rhetorical dimensions in the framing of this phenomenon, and selectively confronts them against available empirical evidence. Section 4 briefly presents the regulatory debates surrounding the sharing economy, discusses their implications with respect to the EBP paradigm, and concludes.

■ Theoretical framework: the policy triangle and the importance of framing

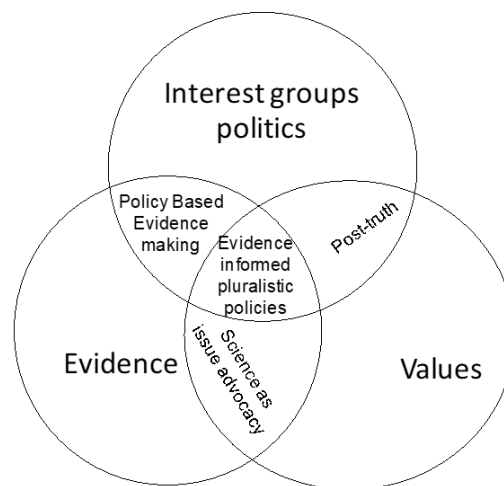
There is plethora of ways in which various authors have tried to characterise the different possibilities in which the relation between science and policy has been or could be articulated (BEST & HOLMES, 2010;

⁴ Recently a collection of essays focused on the future of science advice in Europe ((WILSDON & DOUBLEDAY, 2015) contains interesting contributions both directly from the Commission (MADELIN, 2015), from the JRC (ŠUCHA *et al.*, 2015), as well as two pieces from the former CSA Ann GLOVER (GLOVER, 2015; GLOVER & MÜLLER, 2015).

⁵ First, we refer to the two monographies published by the JRC on the sharing economy in general (CODAGNONE *et al.*, 2016b) and on online labour platforms (CODAGNONE *et al.*, 2016a); these two reports are based on systematic reviews of hundreds of literature sources and of more than 100 hundred "sharing" platforms (with analysis of their business model, as well as of self-presentations, and self-reported economic impacts). In this article we only selectively report and analyse some of the sources documented in these two monographies. In addition, we draw on a forthcoming book (CODAGNONE *et al.* 2017) focusing on the crisis of, and on alternatives to, the EBP paradigm.

PIELKE, 2007; PREGERNIG, 2014; YOUNG *et al.*, 2002). The linear model *versus* the stakeholder model (i.e., PIELKE 2007, p. 76), the "demarcation model" as a way for protecting science from political interference, the communication theory of ineffective transfers where problems are seen as a matter of different languages (i.e. PREGERNIG, 2014), civic science and democratisation of expertise, and many more. That policy can be entirely determined by evidence it is the naïve and technocratic tenet of the EBP paradigm. We see, in fact, policy as shaped by the interaction between the three dimensions of the figure below: evidence, interest groups' politics, and values.

Figure 1 - The policy triangle



We describe the above policy triangle briefly and in stylised fashion for our purpose here is mainly to discuss the role of framing within the interaction between policy makers and interest groups. The evidence dimension concerns science and scientists and how they influence, or are influenced by, policy making debates and the values of the surrounding society (see for instance PIELKE, 2007). The values dimension, with its underlying emotionally shaped system of belief⁶, in a stylised fashion refers

⁶ It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into in depth social psychological discussion of the concept of values and we limit ourselves here to follow the definition provided by THORNGATE (2001, pp. 88-91). An attitude is an attraction/repulsion to/from a thing, idea, concept, person, which is called the attitude object (i.e. a policy or ATO,). The attraction/repulsion is felt as an emotion. The degree of attraction/repulsion is called a value. When we say that a policy has a value it means we have an emotional reaction to it, or an

to society and the citizenry at large. The dimension of politics has to do both with organised interests and policy makers, and we concentrate on it in the following discussion.

The political dimension of policy making involves also the policy making bodies and the policy makers, because it would be naïve to take for granted that policies are enacted only for the public interest and that evidence is used in policy making only for the sake of efficiency and effectiveness. Policy makers have their own agenda and goals, as well as their values⁷. They interact with concentrated specific interests (i.e. industry) and diffuse interests (i.e. consumers). This is a classical distinction following Mancur OLSON'S theory of collective action (OLSON, 1971 [1965]); OLSON deemed diffuse interests as the "forgotten groups" and took consumers as a typifying example of a numerous but dispersed group that "have no organization to countervail the power of organized or monopolistic producers" (OLSON, 1971 [1965], p. 166). According to an extensive review of interest groups' politics (BEYERS *et al.*, 2008, p. 1109), the distinction between specific and diffuse interests remains quite influential but it is rather an empirical question to be tested. BOUWEN, analysing of the multitude of access opportunities used by groups to exert influence in the EU's multi-level, stresses the importance for such groups to provide EU institutions (i.e. Commission, Council, and Parliament) with the "access goods" (basically

attitude. Often we have a set of emotional reactions that can be combined into an overall attitude. Each item in this set, however, reflects a link between our emotion and our belief.

⁷ According to classical Public Interest Theory, policy pursues common and public goods, and addresses market failures. As first advanced by PIGOU (PIGOU, 1920; PIGOU, 1932), regulation is supplied in response to the demand of the public for the correction of inefficient or inequitable market practices. Regulation is assumed initially to benefit society as a whole rather than particular vested interests. The rival of Public Interest Theory has been called the "Capture Theory" (POSNER, 1974) or alternatively the "Chicago Theory" (HANTKE-DOMAS, 2003, p. 165). The first contribution in the construction of this rival approach came by George STIGLER (1971), who wrote about the influence of interest groups in designing and enforcing regulation, arguing that regulatory agencies may be "captured" by special interests. From an organizational and institutional perspective, it has also been shown that policy making bodies as any other organization do not pursue only instrumental goals but also their own survival and legitimacy (DIMAGGIO & POWELL, 1991; DIMAGGIO & POWELL, 1983; SELZNICK, 1948, 1949; WEBER, 1970, pp. 220-222). Finally, in a ground breaking and neglected social psychological analysis of the role of policy analysis, THORNGATE (2001) sheds light on the social-psychological deviations from instrumental rationality in policy-making. His main argument is that policy makers decide to make or improve policies, not only for the intrinsic merits of the policy at stake, but also for competition with peers, to get promotion or avoid demotion, for the desire to save face and that often Policy making is ridden with social influence and group dynamics distortion (i.e. normative conformance to avoid embarrassment, censure, or ostracism, and group processes such as group think bias).

information)⁸ that they demand (2002, 2004); a corollary of these findings would be that specific and concentrated interests (be they association or single firms) have a better capacity to access and/or buy the evidence to be provided to such institution. In this respect it is worth noting that firms increasingly lobby Brussels directly without going through national or pan-national sectorial associations (BERNHAGEN & MITCHELL, 2009).

It is in such context that the issue of rhetorical framing acquires importance as an instrument within the interest groups politics, and brings us back to HIRSCHMAN. Throughout his scientific production, HIRSCHMAN considered ideas, values, and rhetorical discourses as having autonomous effects on the process of change itself, regardless of whether or not they are empirically grounded. He considered them part of the endogenous mechanisms of social and economic change with an approach that can be deemed "pragmatic idealism" (ADELMAN, 2013, p. 422). In his last book *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (1991b), he applied such perspective with its main concerns being the role of discourse in democracy. He observed how opposing groups in liberal democracies sometimes get walled off from each other's opinions and views; rhetorical discourses can explode into conflict simply as a result of the 'imperative of the argument'. Rhetorical discourses limit what people might consider as alternatives and are immune from being wrong and accommodate uncertainty. He found a detached analysis of surface rhetoric, placed historically and analytically in context, more useful than a head-on attack on one of the opposing factions, and claimed that deconstructing rhetoric by using empirical evidence could help restore dialogue and communication between conflicting factions.

Rhetorics are part and parcel of debates on important policy issues that involved opposing interests entering into various forms of negotiations that can be settled or become intractable. Rhetorical discourse is also an instrument of framing policy agenda and debates.

TVERSKY & KAHNEMAN (1981) have shown that framing can affect the choice one makes in any given choice problems, that is to say that framing the exact same choice in a different manner can radically change the choice

⁸ BOUWEN defines access goods as "goods provided by private actors to the EU institutions in order to gain access. Each access good concerns a specific kind of information that is important in the EU decision-making process. The criticality of an access good for the functioning of an EU institution determines the degree of access that the institution will grant to the private interest representatives" (2002: 370).

actors make. So, a framing strategy can be used by players on both sides of a policy contested issue to polarise the situation. Much before that the role of ideas and the framing perspective was taken up in studies of politics and policy making, it was adopted in the sociological analysis of social movements (BENFORD & SNOW, 2000; KLANDERMANS, 1997; SNOW & BENFORD, 1988; SNOW *et al.*, 1986). Frame alignment, bridging, and amplification, are processes of strategic importance in the mobilisation of social movements (SNOW & BENFORD, 1988; SNOW *et al.*, 1986). Frame alignment occurs when individual frames are linked and made congruent and, thus, produce "frame resonance" and catalyse the group formation process. Frame bridging involves the "linkage of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem" (SNOW *et al.*, 1986, p. 467). Frame amplification refers to "the clarification and invigoration of an interpretive frame that bears on a particular issue, problem, or set of events" (SNOW *et al.*, 1986, p. 469). Through the value amplification logic, framers can actively promote and embellish a specific value to justify the actions proposed in its name. "Value amplification refers to the identification, idealization, and elevation of one or more values presumed basic to prospective constituents but which have not inspired collective action for any number of reasons" (SNOW *et al.* 1986: 469). Framing, thus, is at the centre of the social construction of collective action frames creating an interface between media discourses and interpersonal interaction; they produce persuasive communication during mobilization campaigns by movement organisations, their opponents and countermovement organisations (KLANDERMANS, 1997). Following these insights, in the last two decades the framing perspective and the role of ideas have increasingly been applied both theoretically and empirically in the study of both politics and policy making. According to BÉLAND (2009), framing affects the policy making process in three ways: a) constructing the issues entering the agenda; b) shaping the assumptions that affect the content of policy proposals; and c) it may build discursive weapons in the construction of reforms imperatives. Particularly important is the role of framing in shaping policy assumptions, as they form what HALL calls "policy paradigms" (1993).

Therefore, in our policy triangle framework the rhetorical framing of discourse also by way of producing and disseminating "evidence" can be considered a strategy weapon of lobbying especially by concentrated interests in an attempt to shape the policy agenda and contents in ways that are favourable to them or at least to contain the potential damage that may derive from regulatory intervention. As we show in the reminding of this

paper, rhetorical framing has been a key weapon used by the most concentrated and powerful economic interests active in the sharing economy policy and regulatory arena.

■ The rhetorical framing of the sharing economy

The "sharing economy" has been deemed as "floating signifier" for a diverse range of activities (NADEEM, 2015, p. 13) and its usage to refer to various commercial platforms the "triumph of public relations artistry" (TAYLOR, 2015). The matter of the fact is that the ambiguity of the term is such that at times one is left to wonder whether stakeholders, experts, and policy makers are talking about the same phenomenon. As discussed by BELK (BELK, 2014), among all the platforms included in the sharing economy one could distinguish "real sharing" from "pseudo sharing", by which he means "business relationship masquerading as communal sharing". Such conceptual ambiguity goes hand in hand with rhetorical narratives that have been harnessed into current disputes between boosters promising "utopian outcomes" (empower consumers, lower carbon footprint, and efficiency) and the critics denouncing that self-defined sharing companies are in reality about economic self-interest pursued in predatory and exploitative manners (SCHOR, 2014, p. 1).

The roots of such rhetorical framing can be found in the optimism that accompanied the initial phase of the "crowds" and "sharing" phenomena. First came the optimism on crowdsourcing and of the "wisdom of crowds" (ANDERSON, 2006; BENKLER, 2004, 2006; BENKLER & NISSENBAUM, 2006; SUROWIECKI, 2004) allegedly offering a "cognitive surplus" (SHIRKY, 2010) and problem solving capabilities (BRABHAM, 2013; BRABHAM, 2008; GEHL, 2011) and promising new efficiencies efficiency (CHANDLER & KAPELNER, 2013; DJELASSI & DECOOPMAN, 2013; SATZGER *et al.*, 2013). Then came the social optimism on the sharing movement portrayed as offering triple wins: greener commerce, greater profits, and rich social experiences in the form of community revival and strengthening of social capital (GRASSMUCK, 2012; LEADBEATER, 2009; O'REGAN, 2009; WITTEL, 2011). Later on, management (GUTTENTAG, 2013; HEIMANS & TIMMS, 2014; MATZLER & KATHAN, 2015; WEF, 2013, 2014; WOSSKOW, 2014) and neo-liberal economics optimistic narratives followed (ALLEN & BERG, 2014; COHEN & SUNDARARAJAN, 2015; KOOPMAN *et al.*, 2014, 2015; SUNDARARAJAN, 2014; THIERER *et al.*,

2015). Management gurus (HEIMANS & TIMMS, 2014), for instance, proposed a distinction between "new power" (sharing economy, but also grass-roots political movements) and "old power" (big corporations, but also established political parties) where the former is about radical transparency, openness and collaboration and the latter about bureaucracy. Neo-liberal and libertarian economists expect the "sharing" platforms to: a) increase economic activities and productivity through better use of underutilised assets or "dead capital", and through lowering transaction costs that expand trade; b) increase social utility and consumer welfare as a result of more competition; c) create new jobs; d) reduce information asymmetry between consumers and producers thanks to reputational ratings; e) create new markets through disruptive innovations and spur in turn further innovation among incumbent industries; f) produce a new cohort of entrepreneurs if the micro-entrepreneurs who provide services in the platforms acquire the experience and skills to progress and launch their own ventures.

From several analyses of the sharing rhetoric (CODAGNONE *et al.*, 2016b; COHEN & MUÑOZ, 2015; DREDGE & GYIMÓTHY, 2015; MARTIN, 2016) the following themes emerge on the promises of the sharing economy in general: a) revival of community and increase in social capital; b) more equitable distributional effects; c) positive environmental and economic impacts; d) disruptive innovations. With regards to online platforms intermediating labour there are at least three specific rhetorical discourses (see more in CODAGNONE *et al.* 2016a). First, the rhetoric of a flat world allowing digital labour migration with no boundaries. Second, the discourse on extra-money as a motivation to work for the flexers (students, retirees, stay at home parents, etc.); As acutely observed by BERG (2016, p. 18), the claim about individuals working in digital labour markets for "pin money" or out of boredom is a replication of the rhetoric used in the late 1950s and in the 1960s when the new temporary agency industry in the US was portrayed as employing just middle class wives killing time and earning extra-money. This is an emblematic case of HIRSCHMAN'S claim that rhetorical discourses of the past tend to resurface. Third, the alleged contribution of online labour platform to bring back to work the unemployed and under employed. Fourth, the discourse on the flexibility, autonomy, and creativity that these platforms allegedly provide to their workers.

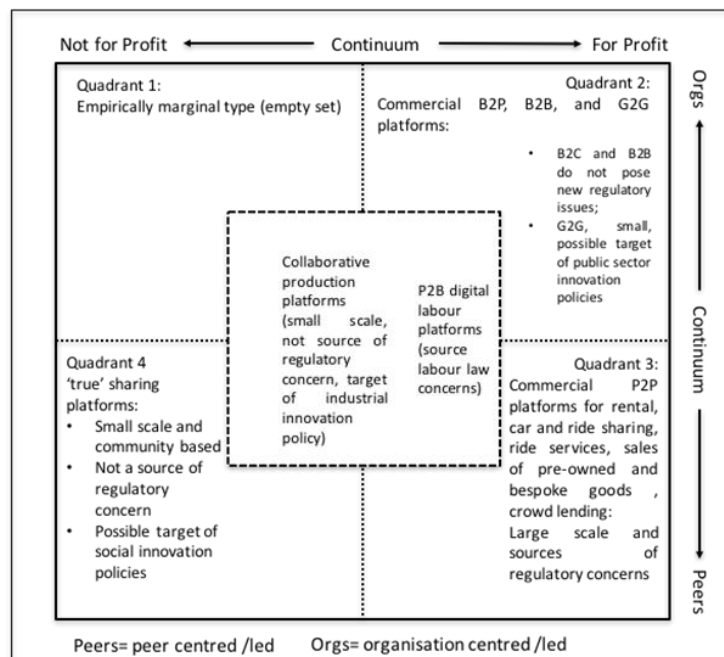
CANNON & SUMMERS (2014) wrote a piece providing strategic suggestions for Uber and other "sharing economy" companies on how to fence current criticisms and win over "regulators" by using state of the art techniques to reach out to government, produce well researched cases showing the benefits created by companies, use external validators, and

create coalitions. Indeed, all the major commercial sharing platforms have just done exactly as suggested. The narrative of their blogs is clearly framed in terms of sharing and caring and they have produced several self-reports on the many economic and social impacts they allegedly deliver to economy and society (see CODAGNONE *et al.* 2016a; 2016b). For reason of space just a few examples are reported here. In a public hearing with the UK House of Lords Patrick ROBINSON (Head of Public Policy Europe and Canada for Airbnb) affirmed that "In our case, the public interest at stake here is, first, about consumers and consumer choice not just to consume services but to be producers of services too. The additional income that Airbnb hosts are making is very important to them. Identifying outdated rules and regulations that might stop people engaging in what is beneficial activity is a good exercise and one that I am delighted that we undertook in London..." (House of Lords, 2016). The rhetoric of a flat world is integrated with that of the advent of a global online meritocracy by the Elance-oDesk (then renamed Upwork) 2014 annual impact report (Elance-oDesk, 2014). Last but not least, On 10 February 2016, Airbnb, Uber and 45 other commercial "sharing" platforms sent an open letter to the Netherlands Presidency of the Council of the European Union⁹, where they demanded to be protected from regulatory intervention taken at national and local level in view of their great contribution to sustainable economic growth in Europe. Not surprisingly, several observers have claimed that large companies have co-opted the sharing movement to pursue economic self-interest through traditional lobbying strategies (LEE, 2015; SCHOR, 2015; WALKER, 2015). According to LEE (2015, p. 17), the "sharing economy" is just another example of how "insurgent sentiments" are used to "sell the *bona fide* of profit-making corporations". The anti-establishment ideology disseminated by magazine Sharable and association Peer.org are increasingly seen as mouthpiece of big companies such as Uber and Airbnb that use such rhetorical weaponry for the pursuit of their economic interests (KERR, 2014). As a matter of fact, it is our claim that the sharing economy is a unique case in which concentrated and specific economic interests (large commercial platforms) not only have used to their advantage the narratives describing the initial phase of the sharing movement, but they have also succeeded in the infrequent objective of enlisting diffuse (i.e. consumers) interests as their allies.

⁹ <https://www.airbnbaction.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/NLCouncilLetterCollabEcon-Final-100216-4.pdf> (retrieved 9-10-2017).

We have fully discussed and proposed a way to use rhetorically free definitions and taxonomies in the two earlier cited monographic works (CODAGNONE *et al.* 2016a; 2016b) and below we limit ourselves to just a very brief conceptual discussion. The expression sharing economy is used to indicate "a wide range of digital commercial or non-profit platforms facilitating exchanges amongst a variety of players through a variety of interaction modalities (P2P, P2B, B2P, B2B, G2G) that all broadly enable consumption or productive activities leveraging capital assets (money, real estate property, equipment, cars, etc.) goods, skills, or just time" (CODAGNONE *et al.* 2016b, p. 22). From this meta-definition the typology below can be extracted that is a useful heuristic tool to make some broad distinctions.

Figure 2 - Broad typology of "sharing platforms"



Source: CODAGNONE *et al.* (2016b, p. 23)

The core type identified is represented by the platforms in Quadrant 3 (including those that are placed in the hybridisation box as they involve also P2B and not only P2P interactions). These are Commercial peer-to-peer (P2P) or peer-to-business (P2B) platforms such as Uber, Airbnb, TaskRabbit, Upwork. They have a large user base, raise short-term

regulatory concerns (market access, taxation, consumer protection and liability, and labour law), and the largest players disrupt incumbent industries and trigger their protest.

It is our claim that large commercial "sharing" platforms are just two-sided markets like most other platforms that are not considered part of the sharing economy and function along the same principles described in the economic literature on two-sided and multi-sided markets¹⁰. Those platforms matching providers of work based services with requested (something missing here?) should just be defined as two sided online labour markets: (1) that work as digital marketplaces for non-standard and contingent work; (2) where services of various nature are produced using preponderantly the labour factor (as opposed to selling goods or renting property or a car); (3) where labour (i.e. the produced services) is exchanged for money; (4) where the matching is digitally mediated and administered although performance and delivery of labour can be electronically transmitted or be physical; (5) where the allocation of labour and money is determined by a collection of buyers and sellers operating within a price system that (CODAGNONE *et al.* 2016a, p. 17), we favour dispensing with rhetorically loaded labels and prefer the expression "market" to "platform" as the latter is surrounded by a politically motivated rhetoric (GILLESPIE, 2010) matched by that on the objectivity of the algorithms they use (GILLESPIE, 2014).

On the claim that an individual joins the "sharing economy" mainly with socially oriented goods and that sharing platforms revive community and strengthen trust and social capital there is quite some evidence that, although not conclusive, it helps bring some realistic appraisal (ALBINSSON & YASANTHI PERERA, 2012; ARSEL & DOBSHA, 2011; BARDHI &

¹⁰ Since 2002, a growing body of mostly conceptual-theoretical economic literature has analysed situations where one economic operator (originally referred to as an intermediary and later increasingly as a platform) brings together at least two different groups of users as instances of "two-sided" or "multisided" (when there are more than two groups) markets. Though they did not use the expression "two-sided markets", the first to look at firms serving two different types of customers and facing the "chicken and egg problem" were GAWER & CUSUMANO (2002) and CAILLAUD & JULIEN (2003). These authors referred to "intermediary markets" serving two distinct groups of customers. The expression "two-sided market" was first introduced by ROCHET & TIROLE (ROCHET & TIROLE, 2003, 2006) and was used later by WRIGHT (2004) and ARMSTRONG (2006) In parallel, EVANS used the expression "two-sided platforms" (EVANS, 2003a, 2003b) and was one of the first to systematically apply this perspective to what he called the web economy (EVANS, 2008a, 2008b, 2009). On the other hand, PARKER & VAN ALSTYNE (PARKER & VAN ALSTYNE, 2000; PARKER & ALSTYNE, 2005) were converging on "two-sidedness" coming from network and information theory, and with EISENMANN were the first to talk about two-sided "strategies" rather than "markets" (EISENMANN *et al.*, 2006).

ECKHARDT, 2012; DUBOIS *et al.*, 2014; LAMBERTON & ROSE, 2012; MARTIN & UPHAM, 2015; MÖHLMANN, 2015; OZANNE & BALLANTINE, 2010; PARIGI & STATE, 2014; PARIGI *et al.*, 2013). Whereas traces of social motivations and community orientation can be found, the evidence helps us go beyond the polarised rhetoric and controversies and shows that at most the sharing economy is a mix of "passions" and "interests". First, individuals join the "sharing economy" both for altruism and in pursuit of utilitarian goals; anti-capitalist and anti-consumption ideologies and sentiments can be found as motivations but are not the norm. Second, sharing platforms create some form of genuine social capital but one can find also reciprocal, even negative at times, exchanges. Third, altruistic and ideological motivations and social capital building seem clearly to characterise more the early not-for-profit initiatives.

While environmental impacts are prominently heralded in platforms self-promotion there is hardly any robust evidence about them (CODAGNONE *et al.* 2016b, p. 41). Actually, very intuitive theoretical reasoning suggests that such impact, if any, is more than counterbalanced by the increase in consumption that platforms generate. Airbnb to demonstrate its impacts on city economies provides "evidence" that its guests spend more than traditional tourists, which is self-defeating with respect to the claim that it produces environmental benefits. On other economic and social impact such as consumer welfare, more equitable distributional effects, reduction of car accidents as a result of drinking and driving (claimed by Uber) the evidence is very limited and inconclusive (BENJAAFAR *et al.*, 2015; FRAIBERGER & SUNDARARAJAN, 2015; GREENWOOD & WATTAL, 2015; HORTON & ZECKHAUSER, 2016; WALLSTEN, 2015). The most robust evidence based on counterfactual methodologies document the negative impacts that Airbnb has on the hotel industry (ZERVAS *et al.*, 2014), depressing revenues and reducing employment (FANG *et al.*, 2015).

Individuals join online labour platforms to integrate their income or for making a living and not for "pin money" (KAUFMANN *et al.*, 2011; PILZ & GEWALD, 2013; ROSS *et al.*, 2010) (IRANI & SILBERMAN, 2013; MARTIN *et al.*, 2014; SILBERMAN & IRANI, 2016) TEODORO *et al.* (2014), and it is not the "generosity of cognitive surplus" but rather monotonous work done for money that characterises the digital matching for the completion of micro tasks (MARTIN *et al.*, 2014). Actually, there is evidence that for some "contractors" online labour platforms are the main source of income (BERG, 2016; University of Hertfordshire & UNI Europa, 2016). There is no empirical evidence that such platforms are increasing the labour participation of the unemployed and under employed (CODAGNONE *et al.* 2016a, p. 40). The

most robust empirical evidence based on experiments and quasi-experimental methods demonstrated that there is not yet a flat world and such labour markets are not an online meritocracy for they are still characterised by frictions, hiring inefficiencies, and biases (CODAGNONE *et al.* 2016a, pp. 44-46). Finally, there is no unequivocal evidence that these markets favour a democratising "long tail" of employment opportunities (AGRAWAL *et al.*, 2013) and there are actually several contributions documenting "super star effects" (HORTON, 2014; MILL, 2011; MUSTHAG & GANESAN, 2013), which means that in several platforms 20% of the workers get 80% of the jobs offered. If confirmed by further studies, this would imply more inequality rather than equalising effects.

In sum, the available empirical evidence not only is inconclusive to support policy and regulatory decisions, but wherever it is at least robust enough it debunks most of the rhetoric and myths surrounding the "sharing economy". But what is most important to stress is that under the current condition of uncertainty (lack of evidence), it is not possible to weigh the benefits of the sharing economy against its possible social costs (i.e. regulatory arbitrage from lack of legislation, negative employment impacts for incumbent industries, future social costs to be borne by the public budget for those working in online platforms with no form of social protection and health insurance).

■ Discussion and conclusions

The debate on regulating the consumer oriented segment of the sharing economy is polarised between those against intervention and in favour of *laissez-faire* and self-regulation ((ALLEN & BERG, 2014; COHEN & SUNDARARAJAN, 2015; KOOPMAN *et al.*, 2014, 2015; SUNDARARAJAN, 2014; THIERER *et al.*, 2015) and those supporting at least some form of regulation (CANNON & CHUNG, 2015; EDELMAN & GERADIN, 2015; RANCHORDAS, 2015; RAUCH & SCHLEICHER, 2015; SUNIL & NOAH, 2015). The libertarian solution uses the weaponry of text-book economics about the failures of regulation and the self-regulatory nature of markets and stresses the risk of regulatory capture of regulators by incumbent industries. As a matter of fact, so far regulators have been captured relatively more by the skilful rhetorical framing used by large platforms as a lobbying weapon, at least judging by the very limited regulation introduced so far in European

Countries and by the very general and quite loose prescriptions contained in the European Commission communication on the collaborative economy.

The same kind of polarization can be found for what concerns the regulation of online labour platforms (CHERRY & ALOISI, 2016; DE STEFANO, 2016; DOKKO *et al.*, 2015; HAGIU, 2015; HAGIU & BIEDERMAN, 2015; HARRIS & KRUEGER, 2015; HILL, 2015; PRASSL & RISAK, 2016), which has been aggravated by the various legal disputes that have engaged judgement to decide whether the individuals providing their labour based services should be considered independent contractors or employees (CODAGNONE *et al.* 2016b, pp. 46-51). In October 2016, a UK employment tribunal dismissed the notion that Uber merely coordinates self-employed workers¹¹. According to the judgement, it would be impossible for workers to grow their businesses through Uber unless "growing their business simply means spending more hours at the wheel". The ruling said: "The notion that Uber in London is a mosaic of 30,000 small businesses linked by a common "platform" is to our mind faintly ridiculous". Yet, the controversies on the status of online labour platforms "contractors/workers" continue, whereas on the matter of their social protection several proposals have emerged. Crowd workers, especially those engaging in multi-jobbing share with other non-standard workers in contractual arrangements with multiple parties the difficulty to identify who is their "employer" for collective bargaining or compliance with health and safety obligations (PRASSL & RISAK, 2016). Also, if they cannot connect the various employers they are excluded by various forms of social protection (ADAMS & DEAKIN, 2014a, 2014b). For this purpose, some have proposed the portability of social contributions and also of reputational ratings across platforms (HILL, 2015), or to create a new category of workers subject to certain regulations, and whose employers would be responsible for some costs (like, say, reimbursement of expenses and workers' compensation) but not others (like Social Security and Medicare taxes (HARRIS & KRUEGER, 2015; HAGIU & BIEDERMAN, 2015). This solution, however, has several drawbacks as illustrated by DE STEFANO (2016, pp. 18-21). Creating an intermediate category of worker such as dependent contractors or dependent self-employed persons implies to identify suitable definitions, which would simply change the object of controversies. In the meantime, neither in Europe nor in the US have policy or regulatory decisions on these matters been taken. The

¹¹ Courts and Tribunals Judiciary _ Mr Y. ASLAM, Mr J. FARRAR and Others -vs- Uber. <https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/judgments/mr-y-aslam-mr-j-farrar-and-others-v-uber/> (retrieved 15 June 2017).

key policy question remains as to whether or not there is a need for regulatory intervention, which immediately gives rise to a second one: what would the costs and benefits of regulation be? To answer this question one would need to have empirical evidence on the current net welfare effects of "sharing" activities and then calculate how this would change after regulation is introduced. As the former is unavailable (see the previous paragraph), the latter is obviously not feasible. Yet, in the face of policy inaction platforms can profit from regulatory arbitrage.

This article has amply documented the fact that the "sharing economy" is currently characterized by conflicting rhetoric and controversies between disputed values and interests. Neutral empirical evidence is currently limited, which creates an opportunity for concentrated interests to lobbying by framing the policy debate also with the evidence they can produce. Platforms produce quantitative evidence using their own data, to which only "embedded researchers" (i.e. researchers who are employed by platforms and have been given access to internal data) have access. The datasets and methods used to produce these reports, thus, are not publicly accessible for third-party scrutiny, but nonetheless such self-interested reports represent an "access good" to influence policy makers. The "sharing economy" epitomises the conditions of Post-Normal science: facts are uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high, and decisions urgent (FUNTOWICZ & RAVETZ, 1991). Under such conditions the EBP paradigm or any other approach envisaging a linear relation between science and policy are naïve or, worse, a shortcut to depoliticise policy making that favours concentrated interests such as those of large commercial "sharing" platforms.

Besides requiring more transparent approaches to policy making, tackling the regulatory open issues would also require a new stream of empirical research efforts. Whereas such efforts could not promise to solve all the conflicts and controversies following a pure "technocratic" model, they could, nonetheless, more "realistically" and "humbly" reduce the current value-loadedness¹² that characterises policy debates.

¹² The reference here is the Max WEBER'S distinction between 'value-freedom' (Wertfreiheit) and 'value-relevance' (Wertbeziehung) with respect to three phases of research: what we research, how we do it, and how results are interpreted (WEBER, 1904).

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