



10 DECEMBER 2010

Collaboratively consuming a new way of living

SIMON SMART



I once left the house intent on buying a reel for a garden hose and returned with something resembling a carry case for an anti aircraft gun.

“Even chicks need a cordless drill mate”, the sales assistant at the hardware store had suggested after hearing me describe the paltry contents of my tool kit. Sadly, that was enough to convince me to purchase a large ‘hammer drill’ that I’ve used about three times in the years since.



Had I been a part of what are being described as ‘intentional communities’, I could instead have checked my phone app for the availability of the required implement, gone and borrowed it from a local tool lending facility, saving myself the embarrassment, the cost and the space in my garage. Not to mention the landfill that my reckless purchase will one day become, having been used for a total of about three minutes its whole life.

That such an exchange is now feasible is a small example of what Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers describe as [Collaborative Consumption](#), a groundswell of social and economic change that is fundamentally to do with the sharing of resources.

In their book *What’s Mine is Yours* they describe a new way of how we consume and do business that they say is taking hold around the world and revolutionising the behaviour of consumers in positive directions.

Collaborative consumption describes the connections between everything from Ebay to community gardens to things like car sharing, music downloads and the bartering of *my* dentistry skills for *your* legal advice. It includes things like internet swapping sites, online reuse and recycling facilities, clothing and toy exchanges, sharing of workspaces, companies that connect travellers with locals, and online bartering networks. The list goes on.

“We are going back to pretty old market behaviours - swapping, trading, renting, bartering,” says Botsman. “But [these things] are being reinvented through technology on a scale that had never been possible before.” The Internet is the key. It provides a platform to enable these actions to cross the line from idealism to convenient reality. The tool-sharing example above is actually possible and workable in many cities around the world now.

Sceptics might be tempted to dismiss this as a temporary fashion or a reaction to the GFC, or a fleeting fancy limited to southern California or Byron Bay, but it is happening on a massive scale and if Botsman and Rogers are right, it represents a seismic shift in how goods and resources are to be exchanged into the future. The good news, according to them, is that this is a ray of hope in getting us off the cycle of consume and waste that so impacts the environment and is ultimately unsustainable.

According to Botsman and Rogers, we are witnessing a shift in focus away from strict ownership to the sharing of resources. They quote *The New York Times* journalist Mark Levine who says that Collaborative Consumption is the way of the future:

Sharing is to ownership what the iPod is to the eight track, what the solar panel is to the coal mine. Sharing is clean, crisp, urbane, postmodern; owning is dull, selfish, timid, backward.

The book is notable for its optimism about where things are going. The authors initially paint a stark picture of the way our individualism and drive for material wealth has taken us. The great pacific garbage dump, a mass of rubbish the size of Texas that’s mostly made up of plastic bags sitting east of Hawaii and off the coast of Japan, is symbolic of this rampant consumption. The same can be said of the astonishing growth of self-storage facilities in the USA: Families have shrunk, houses have grown bigger but still they don’t manage to contain all our stuff.

But change is in the air. More and more of us are waking up to the fact that all this acquisition has come at the cost of relationships with friends, family, neighbours and the planet. Collaborative consumption has several advantages. While it doesn’t require any obvious commitment to being green, environmental benefit is an important by-product. Secondly, companies who are taking up the opportunities in this area are thriving, especially where they embrace creative design strategies that take into account the life cycle of all resources needed to create a service or product. Botsman and Rogers say the myth of a false choice between the environment or the economy is rapidly being dispelled.

Importantly, Collaborative Consumption provides connection. Social capital refers to things of relational value that can’t be measured by GDP and participation in collaborative lifestyles provides an avenue away from the hyper-individualism that has characterised our consumption in the last sixty years.

Sites like Etzy that link buyers with makers of handmade goods, and local farmers markets that have taken off in recent years provide an attractive antidote to the soul sapping nature of mass produced goods sold in sterile retail warehouses. There is something gratifying in chatting to the bloke who grew his avocados when handing over your cash. Proponents of Collaborative

Consumption see such things as addressing our hunger for community.

There are some memorable examples mentioned in the book. Couchsurfing and AirBnB enable travellers not only to save on accommodation but also to have an authentic experience of interaction with locals. Montreal's public bike sharing system makes for convenient commuting that's also good for fitness and obviously does better on the carbon score. The stories of the linking of neighbours who share resources, rides to work, and even join forces to establish shared solar power and pizza ovens are inspiring. Ironically it's the web that makes it easier for people to come together in this way, producing "extreme neighbourliness [that] is so old fashioned as to seem innovative."

It might be that the proponents of Collaborative Consumption have a more positive view of human nature than is justified as they assess the motivations behind some of these new measures. It's possible we're on the cusp of a revolution but it's hard to tell how far the wonders of the net will take us from our obsession with material goods and our selfish selves. Real community, of the type that we mostly need, is costly, and sometimes involves giving out in a way that offers no hope of getting something back. Much of what is described in *What's Mine is Yours*, still feels transactional in nature.

But there's no doubt that this is a refreshing vision of more positive and sustainable consumption that doesn't involve large slabs of guilt or asceticism. It's important that as a society we re-imagine ways of producing and consuming that don't trash the planet. There is something noble and life-affirming in establishing connections between the goods and services we consume and the people who provide them. And wherever relationships can be nurtured and communities established, that has to be a positive step away from the hyper-individualism so characteristic of our culture.

In as much as Collaborative Consumption achieves any of that, I'm all for it.

Simon Smart is a Director at the Centre for Public Christianity

40 COMMENTS

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MsLiss :

13 Dec 2010 10:42:37am

There are many ways to share resources. Stuck in an airport (flight carbon offset via a carbon/biodiversity planting in my conference fees) and finished my library books, I bought a couple of new release books. I'll donate them to my community library, sharing but I still retain access.

This trend is part of people spending less, and I think we have to. So much of our previous spending patterns was on credit and we simply cannot afford that anymore. Embrace the shared, the second hand and the passed on and keep your current "stuff" a fair bit longer that you used to (how much bigger and clearer does your TV picture really need to be?) - you may end up have to work less....

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Ginny V :

10 Dec 2010 11:46:44pm

Simon Smart, I can't see how the selling website "Etsy" (not Etzy) is any different from any other commercial selling outfit. It works just the same as a "buy it now" on ebay. Etsy is not restricted to handmade, crafted items, but sells new and vintage stuff (often at maximum prices). Etsy isn't a swap site or a collaborative consumption site. It's traditional commerce. There is a perennial problem at the real-life markets you like, where goods masquerade as ethical or crafted, or natural, when they are sourced from nasty third-world conditions. Or they are promoted as hand-made or vintage when they are sweatshop goods from China. Alas, there is a LOT of dishonesty in parts of the "Collaborative Consumption" sector.

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Heath :

10 Dec 2010 6:56:39pm

Didn't John Howard's Government make barter illegal?

It apparently forms much of the 'black economy' and was therefore outside the reach of the GST.

▪

Clytie Siddall :

12 Dec 2010 6:25:16pm

I was part of a LETS community barter group about 10 years ago, and I do remember there was a hoo-ha with the tax office about how you tax exchanged effort. I don't remember anything coming of it, but the GST would have revisited it with vengeance.

LETS worked really well. We were able to exchange things we didn't need any more (or weren't able to sell commercially) for things we did need. I think anything based on a fair exchange has great potential.

However, any group of this kind needs people committed to running it. This is the case with projects online as well. You'll find that, unless the project is bring in enough money to pay staff, that it is being run on the effort of a very few people. Thus projects come and go, depending on people's availability. We need exchange and sustainability projects which spread the load more effectively, and make it easier to participate and manage details. There is an economy of scale which should work well with web-based coordination.

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maxine :

10 Dec 2010 3:43:39pm

Simon, where have you been the last 25 years? Yes, I do live in an " intentional community" but I believed that all this was an old hat and many of us have moved on to even higher sharing.

The internet would have helped but for many of us all this (and there is more!!) has been very accessible pre the internet age. Get out a bit more, Simon.

▪

Joyce :

10 Dec 2010 8:39:23pm

Maxine, darn, and there I was told that the best advice is not to take any.

•

Joyce :

10 Dec 2010 3:33:15pm

Why use so much time to work for a comfortable living when as much time is spent on obtaining goods? Free time matters too. Charles Reich put it succinctly in his book 'The Greening of America'.

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TheSceptic :

10 Dec 2010 3:31:47pm

Well, public libraries seem to work pretty well.

Perhaps that should be kept in mind WRT any criticisms of this idea based on 'human nature'.

The far bigger problem is human nurture IMO.. it's not human nature to demand to possess, it's cultural.

A brief investigation of some of the pitfalls of integration of tribal societies that do not have (or have very restricted) property traditions will make this abundantly clear.

It's not human nature that will prevent this from working, it's the entitlement mentality that comes from our cultural programming in our 'ownership' based system. Our obsession with novelty doesn't help either.

And I could totally borrow your drill, I've got a job sitting in my garage that needs a hammerdrill but I can't afford one... Let me know if you need a folding table, I've got a spare one... swapsies? :)

•

Patrick :

10 Dec 2010 3:24:17pm

I definitely like the sharing tools idea, I'm a writer so I don't use tools in my day to day life, but if I need to put up a shelf, or fix a washing machine, I'd love to rent all the tools I need.

▪

David :

10 Dec 2010 4:27:56pm

As a writer, you should use an open source word processor on an open source operating system and report any bugs you encounter. That way, you will be sharing your tool - and helping to improve it - with a global community.

•

Ummm :

10 Dec 2010 3:12:15pm

I hope this is a trend that will increase. I have recently noticed the amount of really good quality 'stuff' that people throw out on Council clean-up days. I have seen complete cookware sets - I mean brand new, sitting on the nature strip. I have seen dinner sets, all perfectly good out there too. Sometimes I take them and try to find someone who needs them. I wish people would make just a little more effort to give things away to a charity instead of just putting them out as garbage.

It would be really great if there were community 'sharing points' where people could easily just take things that they don't want anymore, but which are perfectly good.

I would also love to see more community gardens on vacant Council land, which currently produces nothing but weeds, and wastes a lot of labour and fuel in continually needing to be mown.

Bring on this movement. It sounds great. But just watch - the big corporations won't like it because they want you to consume, consume, consume. It is going to require a lot of mindfulness for the community to overcome this opposition. But really, what the world really needs is to feed itself and for people to feel safe and that they belong in a peaceful and loving community.

Yes we have a very long way to go. Let's get started.

▪

aspieniae :

11 Dec 2010 9:19:36am

You'd be delighted by the number of bicycles that are rescued, refurbished and passed on to the children of refugees.

▪

Boots :

13 Dec 2010 9:11:22am

If you live in Brisbane check out givit.org.au. This is a fantastic organisation that matches up unwanted good quality items to needy people via small local charities. I have children who grow out of everything so quickly and have given a cot bed, children's bedding, clothes, barely worn shoes and toys. If your house / garage is full of things you no longer use register them on this site.

•

Chris :

10 Dec 2010 3:12:10pm

Tis true, the best way to help the environment is to stop spending money. I would like to borrow my neighbour's use on occasion since I don't have a car myself, but he politely suggested I buy my own. Oh well.

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Rob Griffin :

10 Dec 2010 2:56:19pm

My son and I share tools. I figure at 50 years I am not as likely to be into engine swaps at same rate as he is so we share.

In the small town which I live we help each other out with various garden tools and tasks. Our town has unemployed, disabled and a lot of elderly so it all helps us feel less alone in what can be an alienating world.

Complaining about govt and predator corporates is pointless, we know that so if you see someone needs a hand why not help out.

•

Chris A :

10 Dec 2010 2:54:50pm

This is a great idea (though hardly new) and I support the concept totally, but there is a problem, and it's not human nature; not directly anyway.

If such processes really did take off and succeed in reducing consumption they would also reduce economic activity, because consumption, and consumption alone, underpins economic activity. If economic activity reduces then economic growth will slow or stop - and you've probably noticed that governments and industry are obsessive about economic growth regardless of the destruction it causes.

I expect that if such programs were sufficiently successful in reducing consumption that they affected economic growth they would become the subject of negative advertising campaigns by industry and controlling legislation by governments. Failing that, the industries and governments would focus on increasing economic growth (and therefore consumption) in some other area to make up the shortfall.

Such laudable schemes are doomed to failure and irrelevance until we can remove our addiction to endless economic growth; that is where we need to focus our efforts.

-

maxine :

10 Dec 2010 3:48:04pm

" reduce economic activity/consumption" - oh my god!! Is this not the crux of the matter? Are we not part of an over-consuming , over-spending, shameful wasteful mob?

Of course only YOU can kick your habit. The change starts with "I". Get it?!

-

rufus :

10 Dec 2010 2:50:12pm

A big cheerio to the unknown person who 'borrowed' my cordless drill from my garage earlier this year, taking my new bike at the same time. I'm sure you intend to return it any time soon, in the spirit of collaborative consumption.

If not, I hope fate has its fun with you.

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chris :

10 Dec 2010 2:43:40pm

I am tempted to dismiss this as a temporary fashion or a reaction to the GFC, or a fleeting fancy limited to southern California or Byron Bay.

-

rainbow :

10 Dec 2010 3:50:46pm

Sorry Chris - I missed the first part of the discussion (I was out milking the cow or knitting my double fleese jacket)

Dismiss it at your own peril. The situation has changed, and you/I need to also change. The alternative? We will leave a bloody horrible place for our grand-kids.

-

azi :

10 Dec 2010 2:00:01pm

How is collaborative consumption different from socialism, apart from the new jargon? I think the concepts were revolutionary... back in the 1900s.

Which is not to say that the idea doesn't have merit. The problem is getting the concept to work with human nature and avoid its (inevitable?) corruption.

-

granny :

10 Dec 2010 1:09:52pm

I had operated under a form of this sharing opportunity, I hired a skip but overnight the neighbours filled it with their rubbish. Amazingly none would admit to it even when confronted with freshly sawn off branches.

-

Simon :

10 Dec 2010 1:07:34pm

Hmmmm - this "collaborative consumption" thing sounds a bit like borrowing things from your friends. I'm doing it all the time - I had no idea I was part of a revolutionary new paradigm.

This article is an indictment of how life is lived in our big cities - about 99% of people own a drill but Simon Smart is so isolated he can't find a friend to borrow a drill from. Tragic.

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Lehan Ramsay :

10 Dec 2010 12:59:17pm

I've read these kinds of excited stories about new trends for years and years, usually only once.

I wish you were recommending that people go out and get that cordless drill because they'll be tempted to use it. We can only use tools well when we've had some practice at it.

People with no practice are going to have trouble with it and next time they'll just call someone else to do it for them, denying themselves of a chance to really improve their brains and thinking by doing practical problem solving.

So what you're recommending is that everyone turn to a lifestyle that will eventually limit their opportunity to make stuff.

Readers: ignore the advice, I beg you. The man at the hardware counter was absolutely right.

▪
Ginny V :

11 Dec 2010 2:53:07pm

There's a problem with collective collaboration when you lend your gear and it is wrecked. I lent an expensive vacuum cleaner to a little theatre company a few years ago - came back wrecked after they used it with no bag and strained the engine with the hosepipe full. I lent painting equipment to a community group - brushes returned not rinsed out and had to be thrown away. I lent a sewing machine to a community group - never worked the same since, as they had used it to sew leather. I lent three huge commercial sized pots to a theatre group: disappeared. Human nature: when people don't own something, and have borrowed or rented it, they often won't care for it. Sadly, I no longer lend equipment other than to trusted friends.

▪
Lehan Ramsay :

12 Dec 2010 7:49:29pm

Yes, I think people have to learn to use things. So it's often better if they have their own. A collective tool is only going to last as long as it works, and then it's doubtful that it will be replaced. If someone liked it that much they would be buying their own by then.

▪
Big M :

13 Dec 2010 7:14:06am

I agree. Good woodworking tools become part of one's persona. They have a soul. I wouldn't, for instance, lend my handplane or chisels to someone else, particularly after spending time sharpening them.

One needs to have these tools around the place in order to become familiar with them, besides, what sort of bloke doesn't own a hammer, handsaw, drill, and a couple of other bits and pieces?

▪
Helvi :

13 Dec 2010 8:27:10am

Big M, could you please lend me your Allen key, I seem to have lost mine, and Hubby has hidden his one...

▪
Big M :

14 Dec 2010 9:20:17am

Of course, Helvi, I have dozens. They seem to come as a complementary accessory for just a bout everything!

■

Stuffed Olive :

13 Dec 2010 8:32:59am

And a pop riveter.

■

Big M :

14 Dec 2010 9:21:03am

Think the pop-riveter is at the old house. Replacing some gutters, this week.

•

Patrich :

10 Dec 2010 12:49:05pm

A number of interesting questions are raised and circumnavigated in this piece.

Should we be free to dispose of our personal property as we see fit?

Why should one feel "guilty" about owning a little used object/instrument?

Does niggardly behavior really make "the planet" a better place if it contributes to unemployment?

Trends come and go but is conformity a really

desirable trait?

Is it true that people make a considerable amount of money writing about disasters that never came? *exempli gratia*..The gas from the tail of Halley's comet that was supposed to asphyxiate the world in the 19th century.

■

TheSceptic :

10 Dec 2010 5:51:09pm

"Should we be free to dispose of our personal property as we see fit?"

This is a very interesting question, and almost never looked at in detail - or not in the media, that *defacto* cultural dialogue.. sorry monologue.. thing we have going. Specifically, does the right of ownership entail the right of destruction?

If so I'll just go burn this Picasso, shall I? It's my right...

There's a problem with any answer other than 'sometimes' but which times are hard to define.. might come back to that nebulous 'public interest' idea that's equally hard to define..

■

Patrich :

10 Dec 2010 7:33:43pm

Actually I was referring to the act of spending one's money as one sees fit. Buying a V12 car to get to work even if it is within walking distance or a diamond instead of a solar heating system.

Personally I am not too sold on the notion of "the public interest". With it you could argue the re-opening of Dachau and censoring Mark Twain.

As for Picasso; I have a match if you have the canvas!!!

■

TheSceptic :

13 Dec 2010 1:20:43pm

That's why I said nebulous.

My point was just that the right of destruction does not sit well with me, but I'm really quite unable to explain why. It's an interesting idea.

•

Chris A :

10 Dec 2010 12:34:39pm

This is a great idea (though hardly new) and I support the concept totally, but there is a problem, and it's not human nature; not directly anyway.

If such processes really did take off and succeed in reducing consumption they would also reduce economic activity, because consumption, and consumption alone, underpins economic activity. If economic activity reduces then economic growth will slow or stop, and you've probably noticed that governments and industry are obsessive about economic growth regardless of the destruction it causes.

I expect that if such programs were sufficiently successful to have an effect of containing economic growth then they would become the subject of negative advertising campaigns by industry and controlling legislation by governments. Such laudable schemes are doomed to failure and irrelevance until we can remove our addiction to endless economic growth; that is where we need to focus our efforts.

•

TheSceptic :

10 Dec 2010 5:54:35pm

Did you know that there were extensive attempts to restrict or ban public libraries? All historical..

Breach of copyright, you see.... unfair to read those words without paying for the book!

Look it up, it's a fascinating read..

•

Margo S. :

10 Dec 2010 12:28:01pm

Collaborative consumption is a fine ideal -- I have often wondered why we don't have neighbourhood-based centres offering the use of washing machines, lawnmowers, etc. But what about in practice? Models involving shared responsibility for resources and facilities tend to collapse for basic, practical reasons: because what's mine is yours and what's yours is mine, why should I put myself out to look after it? Well-established models of which I am aware, such as membership-based ski lodge accommodation, have constantly struggled to ensure that facilities are sufficiently maintained, and many have had to resort to appointing paid staff to do the jobs (cleaning, etc.) that members neglect -- arguments over who should be expected to load and unload communal dishwashers are common, as well as dissatisfaction arising from differing standards of cleanliness, etc. Considerable thought needs to be given to ensure that arrangements involving communal use or ownership do not fall victim to the 'tragedy of the commons' problem, where everyone sees the benefits but is not so keen to assume the personal sacrifices.

•

Toots :

10 Dec 2010 12:02:52pm

It might work for some , how would they administer it while keeping everyone feeling the warm and fuzzies? Its a great idea but goes against the global corporation mantra as well as the way people have been conditioned to be selfish and greedy even when they think they are being community or civil minded.

•

douglas jones :

10 Dec 2010 11:59:57am

pity we are such slow learners!



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