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September 25, 2010

# Learning to Share, Thanks to the Web

By J. DAVID GOODMAN

WASHINGTON — Can Americans share? Or, at least, not steal?

That question hung over the rows of identical fire-red bicycles lined up last week for the start of Capital Bikeshare in Washington, the nation's largest bike-sharing program.

Similar programs also began this year in Denver and Minneapolis, with another to start in Miami this fall. At the same time, start-up companies with names like [SnapGoods](#), [Share Some Sugar](#) and [NeighborGoods](#) are trying to make money by using social networks to let people borrow or lend their stuff, either free or for a fee.

These companies are looking to join a familiar list — including [Netflix](#), Zipcar and Pandora, the online radio service — built on access to goods and services, rather than ownership.

But the question is whether most consumers would ever accept time share ownership of a bike or a blender. After a bike share program began in Denver, one gubernatorial candidate in Colorado attacked the program as un-American.

But some scholars say that the Internet — by fostering collaboration on a communal, open platform — has changed the way Americans think about sharing and ownership. Collaborative habits online are beginning to find expression in the real world.

"I thought that online was an exception," said Yochai Benkler, co-director of the [Berkman Center for Internet and Society](#) at Harvard, whose coming book, "The Penguin and the Leviathan," focuses on the explosion of cooperative endeavors, both online and off. "I now am more confident that the phenomenon is not limited to online but is a general phenomenon of human behavior."

So far, he said, there have been no formal studies into whether the Internet has affected offline cooperation or attitudes about ownership.

But an ethic of sharing has long found a place in the United States, like cooperative farming and car-pooling, which is the second most common form of commuting. Bike

sharing, too, is nothing new. Early efforts, beginning with shared bikes on college campuses in the 1960s and early 1970s, relied mostly on trust. That model worked in some small towns like Crested Butte, Colo., but tended to collapse quickly in urban environments. (In 2005, a bike-sharing program started in Edmonton, Canada; 95 percent of its bikes were stolen after three years.)

The bike share programs now spreading to cities like Paris, Washington and Hangzhou, China, follow a subscription model and use electronic tracking to deter theft. (By contrast, college campuses use a library model, with bikes loaned for extended periods of time.)

And like most share programs, a credit card is required for collateral. There may also be membership fees and escalating usage charges. (The first 30 minutes are generally free.) So, while it may be sharing, its success is based on technology — and a deposit.

Companies trying to make money from what is called collaborative consumption are not very big and very new. Each counts its members in the thousands, and together they have a few million dollars in goods available to share.

But it is surprising that consumers are even willing to try it. “Everyone thought we were completely crazy two years ago,” said Micki Krimmel, 32, the founder of NeighborGoods, a sharing service. She said her success was based on a “a desire for community, a desire to be more sustainable and, frankly, it’s the economy.”

Publishers have taken note, with books like Lisa Gansky’s “The Mesh: Why the Future of Business Is Sharing” and Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers’s “What’s Mine Is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption,” published this month.

In a 1968 essay, “[The Tragedy of the Commons](#),” Garrett Hardin wrote that resources held in common would inevitably be ruined by individual self-interest and therefore needed forceful regulation.

But scholars like Elinor Ostrom, a professor of political science at [Indiana University](#) and a Nobelist in economics, are revisiting this thesis. Her research focused on instances in which social norms and local understandings led groups to share scarce resources. In other words, people don’t always misuse or destroy the commons simply because it doesn’t belong to them personally.

Yet in the case of shared bicycles, sustainability is still in question. [In Paris, vandalism and theft have plagued the city’s bike share program](#), started in 2007, with most of its 20,000 bikes needing either repair or replacement. “The symbol of a fixed-up, eco-friendly city has become a new source for criminality,” the newspaper Le Monde

wrote in an editorial last year.

And in a nod to our darker side, some advocates of sharing are betting that success is based on, well, self-interest.

"Sharing takes away all the headaches of ownership, and people see that pretty clearly," said Parry Burnap, executive director of Denver Bike Sharing, a nonprofit that runs the program.

It's a sentiment echoed by Lauren Statman, 23, a Washington resident investigating a bike station last Sunday. She just started biking again this month, she said, but is between jobs and not likely to buy her own bike right now.

"It seems cool," she said, "because you don't have to commit."