



# ENVIRONMENT

- [Home](#)
- [News](#)
- [Features](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Video](#)
- [Audio](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [Exclusives](#)

## Features

### Wired to share

By Sue White

ABC Environment | 18 Jan 2011



Australians are loaning or renting their belongs in growing numbers, even to complete strangers.  
*Credit: Giulio Saggin (ABC News).*

**Author Rachel Botsman began wondering how online friendships could affect other parts of our lives. What she discovered may change the way you shop.**

BACK IN THE 'good old days' neighbours used to lean over the back fence and share what was needed. Whether it was an abundant crop of tomatoes, a drill, or a cup of sugar, neighbours knew each other and helped each other out. While many lament the passing of such neighbourly assistance, what they don't know is that it is actually alive and well, and in fact growing.

With technology to thank, increasing numbers of us are now happy to rent or loan complete strangers anything from a drill to a handbag.

Peer-to-peer interaction has blossomed with sites including [Wikipedia](#), [Twitter](#) and [eBay](#) harnessing the power of the masses to run. Rachel Botsman, co-author of *What's Mine Is Yours*, believes this new way of operating may also change how we consume. "People are realising they can make money, save money and access what they need beyond dependency on big corporations," she says.

Sharing is as part of human nature, but we usually only do it when it suits us. "We have a tremendous capacity to share, but it needs to be nurtured. Until now, we've had the wealth and resources available not to need to," says psychologist Dr Susie Burke.

But now, thanks to [Web 2.0](#) technology, it's never been easier to find someone to rent from, loan to or share with, and the statistics prove it's tempting us exercise what Burke describes as "our sharing muscle".

After starting with 12 members in 2003, 10,000 people belong to Australia's first car sharing program, [GoGet](#). Members can use the web to locate and book their nearest car for as little as an hour. Not bad given car sharing didn't exist here ten years ago, but we're still way behind the global trend: by 2015 car-sharing is predicted to hit 4.5 million members in the US and 5.5 million in Europe, where car sharing is already normal many major cities.

[Freecycle](#) is another global success - over 5 million members in 85 countries give away unwanted items via the site to keep them out of landfill. And now we're also using the web to exchange commodities as nebulous as space. The average New Yorker on [Airbnb](#) makes US\$1,600 per month renting their extra room to holidaymakers.

Sydneysider Suzie Johnson uses Airbnb instead of getting a permanent flatmate. "I have guests about a week or two each month to cover half my rent," she says.

Thanks to Web 2.0 technology, we're even willing to lend a stranger cold hard cash. [ZOPA](#) is a peer-to-peer financial lender in which one person lends anything up to £15,000 to a borrower who repays it with interest. "In the UK, ZOPA has one per cent of the personal loans market; because distrust of big banks [there] is at an all-time high," Botsman says.

## Building trust

Trusting strangers with our stuff may be booming, but it still takes getting used to. "Most transactions we have in [traditional] commerce are singular," says [Rentoid](#) founder, Steve Sammartino, whose members use the site to rent everything from car seats to clarinets. "It's 'hi', 'bye' and never see them again. Here, they need to pick up the item, take down details and perhaps a bond over four or five interactions. It can be ... like a first date," he says.

Sammartino says his business would be impossible without the web. "Where would we find the people, or see photos?"

He believes technology will further future-proof the concept. "In a couple of years Radio Frequency Identifiers (RFIDs) will replace barcodes. We'll be able to GPS-track items and have maps showing where all items are being rented out," he says.

Annette Loudon, from the Sydney chapter of community bartering program [LETS](#), says technology has dispensed with the challenges of sharing the old-fashioned way.

"Members used to receive a monthly paper newsletter showing what was on offer, and they'd post paper 'cheques' paying for things. Now it's all online. People can join up and trade at the click of a button, or barter with people in other systems for things like holiday accommodation," she says.

Trade in the goods and services barter has increased trade by 60 per cent since 2008.

## Accidental greenies

Many of the 5,000 product service systems, redistribution markets and collaborative lifestyles Botsman found in her research promote convenience or savings as much as - or more than - environmental outcomes. But separating our desire to use a service rather than own a product can reap significant environmental rewards, notes Cameron Tonkinwise, Associate Dean for Sustainability at Parsons The New School for Design in New York.

"If we all shared lawnmowers we'd only need one for every 10 or 20 households. That would reduce materials intensity by ten or twenty-fold, at least in terms of lawnmowers needing to be produced," he says.

Tonkinwise says in Europe money is now being invested in sharing innovations. "In the early noughties the European Union funded a large amount of work on product service systems [to create] new businesses selling the services associated with products, rather than the products themselves...Innovations were handed over to the commercial sector. One of the key outcomes was the car sharing systems seen in most major European cities," he says.

While digital entrepreneurs are thriving in the new space, Tonkinwise says models relying heavily on leasing rather than selling requires a shift in mindset from traditional manufacturers.

"Their expertise lies in making and selling stuff in a linear fashion. [Take] the Waste Electronic Equipment directive across the EU, which required manufacturers to take back their old televisions. When Philips realised they were going to have a large number of televisions coming back, they had to set up an entire deconstruction factory to pull apart their own stuff. Then they realised they should also be designing products forward, for remanufacturing later," he says.

The real benefits could come when we move beyond sharing twentieth century products. "Most items being shared now have been designed for individual use rather than sharing. People have started designing cars for car sharing. Product service design is a whole new discipline that's going to deliver major innovations," Tonkinwise says.

Botsman notes some big players are already dipping their toe in. "In the last year we've all seen Daimler, Peugeot and BMW all enter the car sharing and ride sharing space. It's a matter of time before big brands like Virgin or Nike start to adopt some of these ideas. Critical mass depends on having the right inventory and enough users, but some of these businesses are turning a profit within the first two years," she says.

Still, don't expect things to change overnight. "The Industrial Revolution took 150 years! We're in the first decade," Botsman says.

[Comment](#)

[Email](#)

[Share](#)

Print

## Comments (0)

[Add your comment](#)

[Comment](#)

### Search Environment

[Search](#)

## TOPICS

- [Climate Change](#)
- [Energy](#)
- [Food](#)
- [Forests](#)
- [Green Business](#)
- [Green Living](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Land Management](#)
- [Murray Darling Basin](#)
- [Nature](#)
- [Oceans & Reefs](#)
- [People](#)
- [Pollution](#)
- [Transport](#)
- [Waste](#)
- [Water](#)
- [Weather](#)
- 

## Opinion

### Putting a price on the priceless

| 17 Feb 11

Speaking in economic terms to those that control the purse strings of the nation is the only way our environment will receive the attention it deserves. [More](#)

[Comment](#)

### The end for coral reefs?

| 16 Feb 11

It is a difficult idea to fathom. But the science is clear: unless we change the way we live, the Earth's coral reefs will be utterly destroyed within our children's lifetimes. [More](#)

[Comment](#)

## On the wider web

### [Chinese develop thorium](#)

The Guardian

[“Thorium has long been hailed as a genuine safe nuclear option, but so far no one has been game to try it. That may all change with China investigating its possibility.”](#)

### [Expensive and ineffective](#)

The Age

[“A Fairfax investigation reveals the climate policies so far, by both Liberal and Labor governments, have been expensive and ineffective”](#)

### [Kimberley gas has winners and losers](#)

Norimitsu Onishi, New York Times

[“The Australian resources boom has conspicuously left out the local Aboriginal people.”](#)

## Twitter

[Follow @abcenvironment on Twitter](#)

## Subscribe

Receive updates from the ABC Environment website. To subscribe, type your email address into the field below and click 'Subscribe'.

[Subscribe](#)

[Manage my subscription](#)

## Best of ABC

### Foolish investment



Online financial advice service *The Motley Fool* has expanded its business into Australia.

- [Watch \(5:03\)](#)
  - [More - Lateline Business](#)
  - [Also on iView](#)
- 



© 2011 ABC