

## Chapter 1

# Introduction: Questioning the Collaborative Economy

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## 1.1 From Sharing to Caring

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This book is one of the main results of the Working Group 4, “Mechanisms to activate and support the collaborative economy”, of the COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Action 16121 “From Sharing to Caring: Examining Socio-Technical Aspects of the Collaborative Economy”, that started in the spring of 2017 with the overarching goal of developing “a European network of actors focusing on the development of collaborative economy models and platforms and on social and on technological implications of the collaborative economy through a practice-focused approach” (CA 16121, 2016; Avram *et al.*, 2017).

One of the relevant aspects of the Action has been to question the collaborative economy in its various instances, from bottom-up peer to peer solidarity (Bassetti *et al.*, 2019) to corporate owned platforms (Rossitto and Lampinen, 2018), in relation to what are known as the European social values, that is the respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law. Looking at forms of economic organization, as the ones collected under the label “collaborative economy”, with the lenses of the European social values brings immediately to the question of the governance of such economic activities and how they organize work and social life.

Engaging in understanding the governance of the collaborative economy, brings with it three potential ways of looking at how collaborative economy platforms organize labor and sociality. Within a *processual perspective*, it is possible to question how the genealogy of specific platforms and the technical and organizational choices coming with it have brought to certain outcomes, in terms of technological features (Bødker *et al.*, 2020), collaborative models and practices (Avram *et al.*, 2019), organizational structures, values and contradictions (e.g., Barbu *et al.*, 2018). Within a *comparative perspective*, comparing different platforms or their use in different contexts (e.g., Clausen and Velázquez García, 2017) allows mapping and navigating the complexities surrounding the platforms under scrutiny, along with their diverse relational qualities, such as: the local/global dimension, the cross- and intra-industries differences and similarities, the forms of ownership, the profit/not-for-profit motive, and the various relations with existing institutions, ranging from governments to trade unions, from municipal actors to social movements. Within a *narrative perspective*, one has the opportunity to investigate the manifold elements that build up the platform self-presentation, such as general social goals and dynamics — from the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to community dynamics, passing through rhetorics of innovation and jobs creation —, the re-articulation of legal aspects (labour regulations, data management, or welfare protections), and technological features aimed at supporting sharing and trust — like privacy protection, or rating and reputation systems (e.g., Richardson, 2015).

Through the collection of various contributions, this book takes a comprehensive approach able to highlight the processual, comparative, and narrative dimensions of the collaborative economy, helping us to address a variety of questions, such as: How do platforms re-articulate, describe, and implement power structures (Lampinen *et al.*, 2018)? Are they innovating in a way that is based on caring social relations or promoting exploitative practices (Light and Miskelly, 2019)? How are economic value, on the one hand, and social and cultural values, on the other hand, produced, circulated, and transformed by platform initiatives (Bassetti *et al.*, 2018; Light and Briggs, 2017)? How the production of goods and services, collaborative subjects, and collective narratives is legally, socially, and technically organized in

platform initiatives (Lampinen and Brown, 2017)? How existing institutions support, favour, or create obstacles to caring and/or exploitative platforms (Cibin *et al.*, 2019; Teli *et al.*, 2020)? Before proceeding with the presentation of how the book addresses those issues, we need to take a step back and introduce some definitions on what we call “collaborative economy”.

## 1.2 Collaborative and Sharing Economy: A Plethora of Practices and Definitions

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Businesses and initiatives that today go under the label “collaborative” or “sharing” economy “range from the small, grassroots-funded variety featured in Shareable to the big and venture-backed, many of which are online platforms” (Balaram, 2016). The domain of activity — accommodation, mobility, food, delivery, etc. — and the geographical scale — local, national, supranational — are similarly varied. Moreover, such initiatives can be carried out with or without any mediation between providers and consumers; when an intermediary is involved, this generally happens via online platforms, which is why they have been defined as “collaborative” platforms. Finally, the practices involved in this kind of economic activities are manifold, including barter, swap and rental; loan, crowdfunding and crowdsourcing; collective purchase, joint ownership and co-creation (cf. Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Botsman, 2013, 2015; Botsman and Rogers, 2011; Frenken and Schor, 2017). The panorama is therefore highly varied, we offer an illustrative snapshot in Table 1.1.

Such a variety is accompanied by variability, as the considered activities are rapidly evolving and the involved actors (both individual and collective ones) change at a fast pace. This favoured the flourishing of a plethora of definitions and labels over the last ten years, ranging from “peer-to-peer” to “gig”, “crowd”, “on-demand”, or “access” economy. As Balaram (2016) wrote half a decade ago, taking stock of what happened until that moment,

In 2009, Airbnb, TaskRabbit, and Uber were fledgling start-ups [...] In 2010, writer and social entrepreneur Rachel Botsman began popularising the ideas underpinning these start-ups under the banner of “collaborative consumption”. [...] By 2011, collaborative consumption gave way to the more intuitive, media-friendly term the “sharing economy”. [...] the sharing economy is conflated with the “collaborative economy”, which emphasises the role that internet technologies play in making connections between distributed groups of people, or with the “access economy” because of the focus on reducing the need for ownership [...]. The “gig economy” and the “on-demand economy” are the most recent additions to our vocabulary, [...] especially when referring to labour of TaskRabbit or Uber’s nature.

Table 1.1. The panorama of collaborative and sharing economy initiatives.

	Mobility	Accommodation	Food	Work	Other Goods
<b>On-demand</b>	Ride hailing (e.g. Uber, Lyft, Bolt)	e.g. Airbnb, Fairbnb	e.g. Foodora, Just Eat, Glovo	Gig work (e.g. TaskRabbit)	
<b>Sharing</b>	Ride sharing (e.g. Blabla car), bike sharing, park sharing (e.g. Just Park)	Couch surfing	Meal sharing (e.g. Meal Sharing), also ethical purchasing groups (e.g. GASs, Alveari)	Time banks	Tool libraries and the like (e.g. Pumpipumpe), recovered factories (e.g. Rimaflow)
<b>Second-hand</b>	Repair and re-use (e.g. Ciclonauti)	/	Food sharing and recovery of wasted food	/	Purchase (e.g. Etsy, Ebay), barter
<b>Product-service</b>	Vehicle rental from a company	Hotel, apartment rental from a company	/	Co-working spaces	e.g. Clothes rental from a shop/company

At the same point in history, the European Commission felt the need to provide a definition, which remained an overarching, “umbrella” one, and explicitly open to change:

For the purposes of this Communication, the term “collaborative economy” [7] refers to business models where activities are facilitated by collaborative platforms that create an open marketplace for the temporary usage of goods or services often provided by private individuals.

[7] The term collaborative economy is often interchangeably used with the term ‘sharing economy’. Collaborative economy is a rapid evolving phenomenon and its definition may evolve accordingly.

(COM 2016, 356, p. 3)

Once more in 2016, Juliet Shor tried instead to restrict the definition of sharing economy by maintaining that “sharing refers to predominantly private, and often non-commercial transactions”. Building on [Frenken \*et al.\* \(2015\)](#) understanding of sharing as “consumers granting each other temporary access to under-utilized physical assets (‘idle capacity’), possibly for money”, [Frenken and Schor \(2017\)](#) further attempted a definition of the sharing economy with the aim to distinguish it from the terms on-demand economy (also called gig economy), second-hand economy, and product-service economy (e.g., renting). In their view, sharing is characterized by the combination of:

- *access* to, rather than ownership of resources, or temporary rather than permanent access (a feature also shared by product-service and on-demand economies);
- *peer-to-peer* exchange (characterizing second-hand and, possibly, on-demand economy too);
- access to *goods*, more specifically “shareable goods”, rather than services (featuring also in second-hand and product-service economies).

The issues at stake, however, are broader. It is not only a matter of more or less specific definitions, analytical distinctions and categorization. As it is always the case with practices, it is also a matter of tacit values, ideals and *Weltanschauung* — of culture, to put it shortly.

The movement began with locally-based, grassroots-funded initiatives such as tool libraries and timebanks, but now seems to be led by global, venture-backed corporations. [...] Early proponents of the sharing economy were advocating for peer-to-peer exchange [...] as rooted in the commons, which encourages shared ownership over, or access to, resources [...] sustainability, openness, and solidarity.

(Balaram, 2016)

What is at stake, therefore, is above all the values orienting economic activity. And this is true not only for the strictly defined sharing economy, but also — as the emergence of Fairbnb, in contrast with Airbnb shows — for the so-called collaborative and sharing economy (CSE) at large, including also on-demand economy. This is the terrain covered in this book, with a particular attention to question the relation between the collaborative economy and the European social values in a way that is open to the complexity of the task. To be able to design both policies and technologies with values in mind, is vital for the future of our societies. To understand those issues, the process bringing to this book has been, in itself, collaborative and complex.

### 1.3 Collaborative Thinking, Writing and Editing: How the Book Came to Be

Starting in Spring 2019, and leveraging on the work pursued during the previous two years within the Working Group 4 (WG4) of the COST Action “From Sharing to Caring”, members started to discuss key issues for a *European collaborative economy that cares*: from media representation of platforms, to the role of institutions in relation to platform-based initiatives, passing through the relation with social movements and the legal framework. A series of *brainstorming sessions* (see e.g., Fig. 1.1) was held during several face-to-face meetings: on March 15, 2109 in Zagreb, Croatia; on April 11, 2019 in Rome, Italy; on May 20, 2019 in Vilnius,

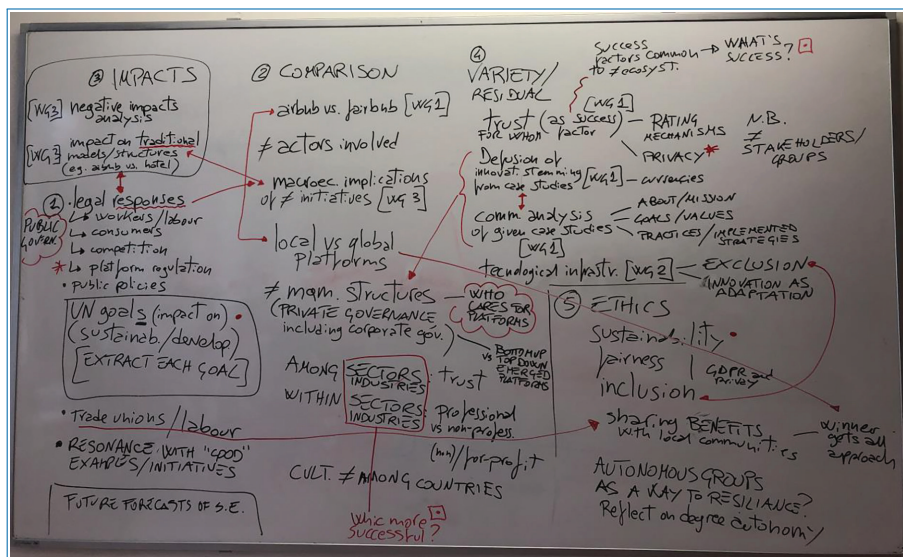


Figure 1.1. Whiteboard of one of the WG4 Brainstorming Sessions.

Lithuania. The overarching questions addressed were the following:

- Which values we as European citizens want to foster?
- What do we mean by a caring collaborative economy? What would be a European platform for a caring economy and society?
- What's unique in a European perspective? What's distinctive about local initiatives and other forms of collaborative economy activities in Europe?
- Do we have “European” technologies? What does that mean?
- What would mean inclusion in European caring economy platforms?

These questions have driven the discussion on some sub-themes to be explored, like the relation between social values and market failures, the organization and governance of labour, which societal problems to tackle, for the benefit of whom, and fostering which values. This discussion brought to a reflection on the space for institutional action around the collaborative economy in Europe, starting with a focus on the relation between local needs and global technologies.

A further meeting was held on October 24, 2019 in Edinburgh, Scotland. On such an occasion, the book call for chapters was shared and some participants presented ideas for potential chapters, looking for cross-country and multi-disciplinary collaborations in the spirit of the COST networking ambitions and the call for chapters guidelines. In the following months, we facilitated such a collaboration by further disseminating the call, collecting proposals, and providing potential authors with an online space where to share abstracts, express interest in given topics, search for writing partners able to provide empirical data and/or further disciplinary/national perspectives on such a topic, or offer one's data/perspective to other participants. *Co-authorship* is therefore a tenet of every chapter of this book.

First drafts of chapter proposals were then collected by Spring 2020 and a process of *mutual review* was established among prospective authors. Alongside the editors, at least two out of the pool of authors reviewed each chapter three times, and all took part in two mutual review meetings in June and in October 2020 (first version and second version review, respectively). Third versions were evaluated only in written form, by the same pool of reviewers, in late Autumn 2020, and final versions were collected in January 2021. Therefore, although editorship responsibility remains ours, editing too may be seen as a collaborative and interdisciplinary effort.

## 1.4 The Chapters: From Individual Motivations to the Future

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As said, the process that has brought this book to life has been extremely collaborative, both in the elaboration of its topic and concerning the single chapters.



While moving from the brainstorming sessions to the first chapter ideas we, as editors, felt the need of writing a call for chapters capable of attracting authors also beyond the ones who participated in the brainstorming sessions, as well as to summarize the main points coming out of those sessions. The three perspectives mentioned at the outset – processual, comparative, and narrative – emerged out of this work. Together with the call for chapters, we needed to elaborate on a potential title for the book. We came to “Becoming a Platform in Europe”, for a series of reasons. First, the verb *becoming* connects to the processual perspective, conveying the meaning of an ongoing process of platformization both behind us and in front of us. Second, adding *a platform* brings the processual perspective together with the narrative perspective, since platforms as things are defined and described, and platforms as organizations —companies or grassroots initiatives— tell stories about themselves. Finally, the reference *in Europe* both delimits the geography under scrutiny and allows for the comparative perspective to emerge.

In structuring the book, we have decided to start with the chapters including comparisons among countries or cases, to later present the chapters that dig deeper on specific processual or narrative aspects. In this way, we aim at providing the readers with some instruments to frame the specific aspects under scrutiny in the light of a comparative dimension. Among those potential instruments, we begin with trying to understand the *individual choices in participating* in the collaborative economy. Majetic and Vega (Chapter 1), as well as Angelovska, Čeh Časni, and Lutz (Chapter 2), examine comparatively the influences on participation of a variety of factors, mainly distinguishing between economic, technological, and non-economic elements. The picture that those chapters offer is a multi-faceted one, providing a differentiated understanding of participation in the collaborative economy.

Moving beyond the understanding of individual motivations, the chapter by Diogo, Sanna, Bernat, and Vaiciukynaitė (Chapter 3) and the one of Rossitto, Lampinen, Light, Diogo, Bernat, and Travlou (Chapter 4) investigate *the use of platforms at the local level*. In the first case, the attention is on the use of one of the classical examples of the collaborative economy, the sharing of bikes and e-scooters for urban mobility, that provides meaningful insights on commonalities and differences among the provision of services and their uses in four European capitals, Budapest, Lisbon, Rome and Vilnius. Chapter 4, on the other hand, discusses “the platform paradox in community initiatives”, investigating why and how grassroots initiatives of solidarity in several countries end up relying on Facebook as an infrastructure, although in many ways their values are in opposition to the social media giant.

The analysis of the relation between *platform design and political dimensions* is the key contribution of the chapter by Cruciani and Lewkowicz (Chapter 5) and

the one of Goyens and Huybrechts (Chapter 6). Whereas the former allows understanding how grassroots initiatives can be supported by ways of designing capable of motivating participation in voluntary, time-consuming activities, the latter focuses on how the collaborative economy itself can be read as a political phenomenon, changing local relations. Moving beyond the local level, Koka, Kruja and Hysa (Chapter 7) discuss how research on the use of collaborative economy platforms, specifically AirBnB in Albania, points to the need of policy interventions. On a specular side, through two situated case studies, Larner (Chapter 8) shows how it is possible to think not only of policy intervention but to imagine alternative business models that reflect solidarity and collaboration while trying to ensure economic and financial viability. Dumančić, Naëinović Braje, and Aleksić (Chapter 9) remind us that thinking about the economy means to think about the way work is regulated at the legal level, with a focus on the differences in the worker-employer relation between traditional jobs and platform-mediated ones.

All the chapters mentioned so far point to the complexity of understanding the collaborative economy—a condition which does not favour effective policymaking, especially if values-oriented and aimed at medium-to-long-term outcomes. Sanna and Michelini (Chapter 10) offer a supporting tool by focusing on the methodologies to assess the *impact of the collaborative economy*, discussing also their policy implications. The last two contributions presented in this book further move discussion towards the future. More specifically, Crombie, Kollegala, and Zehle (Chapter 11) question recent technological developments, proposing to imagine a new design stack, an ensemble of technologies that can support solidarity and cooperation, while Subaşı, Fedosov, and Bates (Chapter 12) report on an experience of imagination of future cooperatives in the domain of the collaborative economy, rethinking basics of contemporary economy like currency and data. These last chapters are crucial in the overall picture provided by this book, as they highlight one fundamental aspect of “Becoming a Platform in Europe”, the need to turn the understanding of the European social values into actionable processes flowing through policy, technology, and organizing.

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