

## The collaborative Economy and Tourism

*Critical perspectives, questionable claims and silenced voices*

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# **Collaborative Economy and Tourism: Critical perspectives, questionable claims and silenced voices**

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## **Abstract**

House swapping, ridesharing, voluntourism, couchsurfing, dinner hosting and similar innovations epitomize the collaborative economy. The rise of the collaborative economy, also known as collaborative consumption, the sharing economy and peer-to-peer consumption, has been fuelled by a range of social, economic and technological factors including a shift away from ownership towards temporary access to goods; the use of technology mediated transactions between producers and consumers; direct host-guest relationships that contribute to a higher level of perceived authenticity of tourism experiences; and higher levels of consumer risk-taking balanced against mechanisms such as peer-to-peer feedback designed to engender trust between producers and consumers. This paper explores and critically assesses the collaborative economy and its implications for tourism industrial systems. It achieves this by mapping out the current knowledge dynamics characterising tourism and the collaborative economy, paying particular attention to the asymmetries of knowledge that are emerging. The paper then identifies and critically discusses five pervasive claims being made about the collaborative economy, arguing for a balanced assessment of such claims. Highlighting these claims allows us to pursue a more reflective research agenda and leads to a more informed, evidence-based assessment of the collaborative economy and tourism.

## **Keywords**

collaborative economy, collaborative consumption, tourism, exchange, critical studies, sharing

## Introduction

On February 2, 2014 Amsterdam launched its *Amsterdam Sharing City* campaign and officially became Europe's first named sharing city, but this was far from an isolated initiative in a country that has a long history of pluralistic, community-driven politics. Other major cities, including San Francisco, Paris, London and Singapore, have also opened their doors to policy reforms that could facilitate the collaborative economy. While sharing, gift and barter economies have always existed in closely-knit communities, the confluence of a number of conditions has facilitated sharing and collaborative exchange on a much broader scale (Belk, 2014b; Botsman & Rogers, 2011). These conditions include the rapid widespread uptake of mobile technologies and low requirements to entry for start-ups. The rippling effects of global financial crises from 2008 onwards have also fed growing demand for alternatives to unsustainable consumption and industrial forms of capitalism (Ranchordás, 2014). Against this background, the rise of the collaborative economy since 2010 has prompted *Time* magazine to claim it as one of the top 10 ideas to change the world (Walsh, 2011).

In tourism, collaborative economy start-ups adopting both for-profit and not-for-profit structures have swept across the globe triggering claims that the collaborative economy is disrupting tourism industrial systems (Intercontinental Hotels Group, 2012; Zervas, Proserpio, & Byers, 2013). Themes from the 2014 World Travel Market or the 2015 ITB in Berlin reflect increasing concerns about the impacts of the sharing economy on traditional tourism industrial models and stakeholders (ITB Berlin, 2014; World Travel Market, 2014). In this paper we explore the lack of clarity around concepts such as sharing and collaboration, and seek to cast a wider net to include a variety of exchange forms (monetised as well as non-monetised; technology-facilitated as well as face-to-face transactions) that may have implications for traditional tourism industrial systems. The aims of the paper are threefold: first the paper will map out the current knowledge in tourism and the collaborative economy. Second, the paper will identify and critically discuss various claims being made about the impacts of the collaborative economy on tourism, taking consideration of contested and silenced perspectives. Third, based this critical discussion, the paper will identify opportunities and challenges for future research. We employ a critical lens, highlighting questions, contradictions, and taken-for-granted assumptions in knowledge about the collaborative economy. An important contribution of this paper is to address emerging asymmetries in knowledge, to call attention to silenced perspectives and issues, and to flesh out a research agenda that is less about advocating for the collaborative economy and more about providing knowledge for informed decision making.

## Approach to the Paper

The impact of the sharing economy on tourism has come to recent attention largely because of the speed at which it is growing and recent valuations of such companies as Airbnb and Uber. While it is possible to identify factors contributing to the rise of the sharing economy, and then jump to discuss what we should do about it, such an approach diverts attention away from the key question 'Is the collaborative economy (partially or entirely) good and/or desirable? A critical sociology of knowledge approach suggests that how issues are framed

creates path dependencies that privilege certain aspects of the problem. In turn, this framing shapes how research needs are identified and, ultimately, how solutions to problems are shaped (Czarniawska, 2004; Law, 2004). The key task in trying to identify and address these asymmetries of knowledge production is to uncover the mechanisms of power through which these framings are constructed (Callon, 1986; Law, 2004). This paper seeks to adopt a critical approach in surveying current knowledge about the collaborative economy and tourism, and in doing so, it pays particular attention to the knowledge dynamics that have characterised the collaborative economy to date.

In addressing the above aims, we follow the recommendations proposed by critical post-structural researchers who take the view that reality is constructed, communicated and routinised in a social world (Callon, 1986; Law, 2004). Law (2004) argues that it is easier to create new knowledge and new realities by building on to the blackboxes of knowledge that are already routinised and readily available, and that our capacity to push knowledge boundaries depends upon critically assessing current knowledge and identifying silences, hidden issues and gaps. On this basis, Callon (1986) identifies three recommendations: to pursue symmetry of knowledge; adopt a position of agnosticism; and to question and free-up taken-for-granted causal assumptions. Callon's recommendations have come under criticism by those arguing that as researchers we cannot remove our subjectivities to achieve a truly agnostic standpoint or release ourselves from all preconceived assumptions. However, his recommendations prompt us to reach for a more balanced perspective in which we are attuned to the power underpinning knowledge production. Drawing upon this advice, we seek to be sensitive to the way in which issues have been constructed, how those social constructions about the collaborative economy have been routinised, and they are shaping both the knowledge available as well as the canvas of possible actions and solutions to deal with the collaborative economy.

### **Asymmetries of Knowledge**

In exploring these asymmetries, Callon (1986) identifies four 'moments' of translation wherein actors make decisions about an issue, impose that definition of the situation or problem on others, and that framing of the issue becomes embedded and mobilised. These stages are: problematisation, interessement, enrolment and mobilisation, and provide insights to better understand knowledge asymmetries in tourism and the collaborative economy. First, *problematisation* can be traced to Botsman and Rogers' (2011) *What's Mine is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption*. This book, which claims to have 'defined the theory of collaborative consumption', was supported by Botsman's 'breakthrough TED Talks' and website (<http://rachelbotsman.com/>). The book and media collateral, oriented towards a popular market, had the effect of appropriating the pre-existing term 'sharing economy' into collaborative consumption, and problematising it as a creative disruption that refocuses consumption on the consumer and not the producer. Botsman and Rogers (2010:xvi) distil the complexity of change into three systems—product service systems, redistributive markets, and collaborative lifestyles—arguing that these systems are together redefining not only what we consume, but how we consume it. Furthermore, they claim this move towards more sustainable consumption is underpinned by four principles—critical mass, unlocking idling capacity, belief in the commons, and trust between strangers (*ibid*).

These arguments have been reproduced by a multitude of collaborative economy intermediaries and interests adept in conveying highly formulaic but appealingly simple messages (e.g. Rinnie, 2013). In their acknowledgements, Botsman affirms the plan of “taking the ideas of collaborative consumption beyond words and into a movement” (Botsman and Rogers, 2010:229). As a result of this highly codified explanation of the collaborative economy, a passage point opened up empowering a movement mooted to be more sustainable, democratised and empowered than modern capitalistic modes of consumption. As will be discussed below, these ideas have existed for some time and have been the subject of extended discussions by researchers, politicians, policymakers, activists, NGOs and community groups. Nevertheless, Botsman and Rogers (2010) effectively problematised, repackaged and inspired a new generation of entrepreneurs, providing a passage point to the next moment.

Second, *interessement* (French for ‘interposition’) was achieved through a powerfully simple message: by building critical mass through digital technologies, making use of spare or ‘idling’ capacity, believing in the commons, and facilitating trust between strangers, it is possible to unlock new ways of accessing goods and services and an alternative to unsustainable overproduction. This message was empowered through Botsman’s recognition as a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader. This moment of translation also includes the reproduction of this message by a diverse group of supporters including the Harvard Business Review, the Saïd Business School (Oxford University), and most notably, the increasing number of start-ups that have enjoyed significant success and who are also actively promoting similar messages. The message has also been deepened and made more explicit through the contributions of protagonists who identify the ways the collaborative economy adds value (Koopman, Mitchell, & Thierer, 2014).

Third, *enrolment* has been achieved by drawing attention to the potentially significant disruptive structural and innovative changes taking place in a wide range of sectors including tourism. House swapping, ridesharing, voluntourism, couchsurfing, dinner hosting, crowd-sourcing of micro-financing and similar phenomena epitomise these emergent collaborative opportunities. These ideas have enjoyed popular success, and when combined with the huge successes of collaborative consumption start-ups, there has been widespread interest in what has been cast as a new economic form that offers more sustainable and accessible forms of consumption. Many of the largest start-ups such as Airbnb, Lyft and Uber have now established departments of research, government relations and/or public policy (Kerr, 2014). Sites such as *The AirBnB public policy blog* (AirBnB, 2015) not only illustrate the extent to which such companies are assisting and supporting public policy research and development in various cities across the globe, but they are also playing good corporate citizens by cleaning up local parks and sponsoring community events. In addition, some individuals positively aligned with collaborative economy interests regularly feature as keynote speakers in global travel fairs, delivering orchestrated messaging and perpetuating asymmetric knowledge production that fosters enrolment.

Fourth, *mobilisation* has been achieved through the proliferation of information sharing on platforms such as [www.collaborativeconsumption.org](http://www.collaborativeconsumption.org), and the growth of micro-financing opportunities for start-ups such as [www.collaborativefund.com](http://www.collaborativefund.com). Illustrating Botsman’s important role as an entrepreneurial, information and motivational agent in the mobilisation

stage, she was an early investor in this fund, which provided a source of seed capital for creative entrepreneurs. Mobilisation may also entail formulaic narratives about the benefits of the collaborative economy. For instance, inspired by Snow White, Airbnb used Disney-Pixar animators to storyboard the perfect Airbnb experience (Kessler, 2012). As a result of these developments, advocacy and independent information are blurred; intermediaries such as Airbnb or Uber have become policy advisors; ‘independent’ journalists and bloggers are on the boards of sharing economy start-ups; and publically-funded think tanks openly advocate for the interests of for-profit collaborative economy enterprises (Kerr, 2014).

In contrast to the highly orchestrated information, advocacy and media campaigns of collaborative consumption protagonists, scholarly research is highly fragmented. Contrary to Botsman’s earlier claim, Felson and Spaeth (1978) first coined the term ‘collaborative consumption’. However, the body of scholarly work is quite small, with the Scopus database recording only 28 articles published between Jan 2011-Apr 2015, and Web of Science recording 18 articles, all published after 2011. As discussed below, there are also huge variations in terminology and a large number of scholarly articles fail to make reference to ‘collaborative consumption’ or ‘collaborative economy’ as keywords, but explore topics such as ride sharing, accommodation sharing, house swapping, crowd-sourcing, kitchen-surfing, task-sharing, social e-commerce and so on.

Also interesting is the very small body of scholarly work available on the collaborative economy (and its associated terms) when compared to the large number of items identified in a Google search. While Google does not filter for quality, it includes grey literature, blogs, commentaries, consultant and corporate websites, many of which contain sponsored studies, recommendations, and non-scholarly research of variable quality. What we can discern from this asymmetry of information is that there appears to be a significant body of ‘grey’ research that is generated by the protagonists of collaborative consumption, and there is little independent scholarly research on the topic. From a sociology of knowledge perspective, the dominance of a handful of opinion leaders in knowledge production raises an acute need to question the assumptions underpinning the smooth, unproblematic position that the collaborative economy is positive, sustainable, democratic and accessible to all. This paper contributes to this dialogue by identifying pervasive and unquestioned claims. Prior to this endeavour, clarification of terminologies and an exploration of the genealogy of collaborative concepts are essential.

## **Defining the Collaborative Economy**

Anthropologists, sociologists, economists and environmental scholars offer a number of related terminologies and take different perspectives on the phenomenon, either attempting to categorise it as a disruptive and new economic logic (e.g. sharing economy, peer-to-peer economy, access-based economy), or as a techno-social trend in consumer societies (e.g. the mesh, connected consumption, collaborative consumption, access-based consumption). The choice of term highlights an arbitrary set of aspects an author or protagonist is attempting focus upon while at the same time it also conceals other dimensions. As a result, most terms are partially appropriate, but most fail to fully capture the collaborative phenomena or tend to obscure the original socio-cultural implications of sharing (Belk, 2014a).

## The Genealogy of Sharing Economy Terms

Our genealogic investigations revealed not less than 17 terms related to the sharing economy. These terms often frame the sharing economy as a hybrid, digitally facilitated, alternative economic model embedded in (or rediscovering) deep-rooted cultural, moral and ecological rationales. Different conceptualisations take their point of departure in human ecology, computer science and neoclassic microeconomics, anthropology, postmodern sociology, philosophy, politics and cultural theory. As such, sharing economy metaphors are formulated along and *unite previously incompatible ideas*, like (1) models of economic systems (circuit, regime, networks and ties, transactions, relationships); (2) cultural and moral perspectives on human coexistence (negotiation, lifestyle, stewardship, prosocial behavior/altruism, collaborative symbiosis) and; (3) ideas of efficiency and enhanced value creation (zero marginal costs, full interconnectedness, direct exchange, optimised capacity use, recirculation of idle resources)

Table 1 lists these terms and overviews various streams of authorship contributing to their development. The Table includes a list of terms and definitions crediting the original author, and an indication of the key scientific context they have been inspired by (e.g. human ecology, cultural theory, computer science and artificial intelligence, microeconomic theory and so on). It is noteworthy to mention that most recent conceptualisations are postdisciplinary in nature; bridging, crossing and moving beyond classic scientific disciplinary boundaries.

Term	Author	Definition	Metaphor
<b>Human Ecology</b>	Hawley (1950) <i>Human Ecology: A Theory of Community Structure</i>	Human populations organize themselves in communities (symbiotic and commensalistic relationships) to adapt to their environment. Joint and <b>coordinated performance</b> to gain sustenance.	Ecosystem (Biology)
<b>Collaborative Consumption</b>	Felson & Spaeth (1978) Adapting the ideas of Hawley to consumer behaviour	“Actors of collaborative consumption [are] <b>events</b> in which one or more persons consume economic goods or services in the process of engaging in <b>joint activities</b> with one or more others (Felson & Spaeth 1978:614)	Community (Sociology, Human Ecology, Consumer Behavior)
<b>Access Economy</b>	Rifkin (2000) <i>The Age of Access: A New Culture of Hypercapitalism</i>	<b>Property regimes</b> have changed to <b>access regimes</b> characterised by short-term limited use of assets controlled by networks of suppliers.	Transaction exchange (Neoclassical microeconomics)
<b>Moral Economy</b>	Bauman (2003) <i>Liquid Love and Human Bonds</i>	“A community, neighbourhood, circle of friends, partners in life and partners for life [...] fellows in the ongoing, never-ending <b>joint effort</b> of shared life building and making shared life liveable” (Bauman 2003:70)	Culturally embedded human/ist coexistence (Postmodern Sociology)
<b>Social Sharing</b>	Benkler (2004) <i>Sharing Nicely: On Shareable Goods and the Emergence of Sharing as a Modality of Economic Production</i>	Sharing is nonreciprocal <b>pro-social behaviour</b> . [...] Social sharing and exchange is becoming a common <b>modality</b> of producing valuable desiderata at the very core of the most advanced economies—in information, culture, education, computation, and communications sectors (Benkler (2004:278)	Transactional exchange (Neoclassical microeconomics)
<b>Alternative Post-Capitalist Economies</b>	Gibson-Graham (2006) <i>A post-capitalist politics and Take back the economy</i> Gibson-Graham, Cameron & Healy (2013)	Envisions, politicises and enacts economic transformation by empowering <b>placed-based community</b> approaches to unlocking diverse economies	Post-capitalist social movement (Marxist inspired alternative economies)
<b>Collaborative Consumption v. 2.0</b>	Botsman & Rogers (2010) <i>What's Mine Is Yours: How Collaborative Consumption is Changing the Way We Live</i>	A <b>system</b> activating the untapped value of assets through models and marketplaces that enable greater efficiency and access (Botsman 2014:24)	Circular system (Neoclassical microeconomics, Systems theory)
<b>Collaborative Lifestyles</b>	Botsman & Rogers (ibid.) Adapting the ideas of Felson & Spaeth (1978) and Rifkin (2000)	Collaborative <b>Lifestyles</b> : “people with similar interests are <b>banding</b> together to share and exchange less tangible assets such as time, space, skills, and money” (Botsman and Rogers 2010, 73)	Lifestyle (Cultural theory)
<b>The Mesh (aka the Sharing Society)</b>	Gansky (2010) <i>Why the Future of Business is Sharing?</i>	Digital technologies of Web 2.0 provide full <b>interconnectedness</b> among people to access and distribute goods and services at the exact moment they need them, without the burden and expense of owning them.	Mesh = highly interconnected network of computers (Computing Science)
<b>Circuits of Commerce</b>	Zelizer (2010)	Circuits are <b>social transactions</b> and [...] consist of dynamic, meaningful, incessantly negotiated interactions among individuals, households, organizations, or other social entities, [based on] distinctive media (for example, legal tender or localized tokens) and an array of organized, differentiated transfers (for example, gifts or compensation).	Transactional circuits (Neoclassical microeconomics)



<b>Access-Based Consumption</b>	Bardhi & Eckhardt (2012) Adapting the ideas of Jeremy Rifkin to P2P transport /carsharing	<b>Transactions</b> that may be market mediated in which no transfer of ownership takes place (Bardhi & Eckhardt 2012:881)	Market-mediated transactions (Neoclassical microeconomics)
<b>Peer-to-Peer Economy</b>	P2Pfoundation.net (2012)	<b>P2P business models</b> allow direct exchanges among peers and entail a variety of platforms on which citizens rent, sell and share things without the involvement of shops, banks, agencies and other intermediaries (2012).	Exchange system (Neoclassical microeconomics)
<b>Moral Economy (of alternative tourism)</b>	Germann Molz (2013) Adapting the ideas of Bauman (2003) to P2P tourism phenomena e.g. Couchsurfing	Based not on the exchange of money but on <b>cooperation and generosity</b> , shared goods and services, mutual help and support a moral economy involves a far <b>different kind of exchange</b> from the market economy (Molz 2013)	Exchange system (Cultural economics)
<b>Sharing vs. Pseudo-sharing</b>	Belk (2007; 2010; 2014a) Synthesizes ideas from anthropology (gift giving and sharing] with the proponents of collaborative consumption.	Collaborative consumption is an <b>economic model</b> based on sharing, swapping, trading, or renting products and services enabling access over ownership. [...] <b>Coordinated acquisition and distribution of a resource</b> for a fee or other compensation (Belk 2014:1597)	Economic model based on more-than-economic, coordinated transactions (Cultural Economy)
<b>Connected Consumption</b>	Schor & Fitzmaurice (2015) <i>Collaborating and Connecting: The emergence of the sharing economy</i>	Connected Consumption is based on a <b>culture of access, use, and re-circulation</b> of used goods as alternatives to traditional private ownership. (Schor & Fitzmaurice 2015, forthcoming)	Culturally conditioned collaborative behavior (Cultural economy)
<b>Collaborative Commerce</b>	Sigala (2015) Adapting Huang & Benyuçef's (2013) ideas on social e-commerce	Collaborative commerce creates an <b>exchange economy</b> whereby customers become producers/suppliers and sellers of their own travel goods by negotiating and bartering exchanges for trading these goods even without having the use of money. Such C2C transactions provide alternative travel goods that can also enhance tourism sustainability by generating various forms of social value (Sigala 2015:3)	Collaborative value co-creation (neoclassic microeconomics, service marketing)
<b>Sharing Economy</b>	Lessig (2008) <i>Remix: Making art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy</i> , among others	<b>The Sharing Economy is a socio-economic ecosystem</b> [...] which embeds sharing and collaboration at its heart [...].It includes the <b>shared creation, production, distribution, trade and consumption of goods and services by different people and organisations.</b> (Matovska 2015)	Socio-economic system (human ecology, microeconomics, cultural theory)
<b>Hybrid Economy</b>	Rifkin (2015) <i>The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism</i>	"The plummeting of marginal costs is spawning a hybrid economy—part capitalist market and part <b>Collaborative Commons</b> —with far reaching implications for society. [...] In this new world, social capital is as important as financial capital, access trumps ownership, sustainability supersedes consumerism, cooperation ousts competition, and "exchange value" in the capitalist marketplace is increasingly replaced by " <b>sharable value</b> " on the "Collaborative Commons" (Rifkin 2015:2).	Digitally facilitated socio-economic system (human ecology, microeconomics, cultural theory and computing science)

Table 1. A chronological illustration of the genealogy of the concept of the sharing economy

## Exploring the sharing economy and related terminologies

In anthropological studies, sharing can be traced back to historical concepts such as the gift, exchange or barter economy. Sharing and gift-giving within family, close kin and friends depicts nonmonetary exchanges between people who know each other. Barter systems have existed and shaped society since prehistoric times, and cultural anthropologists have studied cultural norms and conventions governing them for over a century (Mauss, 1922/1990; Humphrey, 1985; Derrida, 1992). Belk (2007) and other social anthropologists have theorised the social and cultural features of sharing, defining it succinctly as “nonreciprocal, pro-social behaviour” (Frey & Meier in Benkler, 2004:275). The altruistic act of sharing serves social purposes: to forge and reinforce social bonds between individual members of a group or community. Sharing encapsulates the collective use or consumption of commodities without compensation or permanent transfer of ownership. In contrast, gift-giving, swapping and bartering rely on reciprocity and permanent transfer ownership, where no monetary transaction is involved. Such relationships between giver and receiver are conditioned by mutual trust, intimacy or other types of proximities.

Contemporary sharing economy phenomena differ significantly from the trading prototypes defined above. They increasingly, but not always, involve interactions among strangers and transcend a geographically defined community. Exchange is most often monetised, systematised in a business model, and facilitated by technology. The first generation of *faux sharing* commercial ventures (a term coined by Belk 2014a) emerged in the 1980s. For instance, Michael Linton developed the Local Exchange Trading System (LETS) to facilitate the exchange of in-kind services within members of a small community in British Columbia (Linton, 1984). With the advent of the Internet and the social technologies of Web 2.0, the opportunities to liaise on a global scale have multiplied. Lisa Gansky labelled digital interconnectedness ‘*the mesh*’ (Gansky, 2010), emphasising the variety of new, peer-to-peer (P2P) distribution platforms to access goods and services. In tourism these include couchsurfing, house-swapping, dinner sharing and others.

Twentieth-century consumer cultures have developed along the credo ‘you are what you own’ (Belk, 1988). Hence, consumable possessions have been considered as significant accessories of identity construction, an observation also made within tourism (Wearing & Wearing 1996; Welk 2004; Holstein & Gubrium 2002). However, contemporary consumer narratives are less frequently framed along own consumables and enduring goods. Jeremy Rifkin (2000) claims in his influential book, *The Age of Access* that temporary access to possessions is becoming increasingly more important than ownership. As technological platforms enable zero-threshold, real time access to a range of experience economy commodities (e.g. music, films, books), the worth of identity-forming possessions becomes obsolete. Such *access-based economy* business models are becoming attractive innovation opportunities within tourism and the hospitality industry, exemplified by timeshare and office-on-demand concepts in urban hotels. Intangible tourist experiences, such as local guided tours or dining experiences with locals, are also examples. Common to these collaborative concepts is that they are facilitated by a matchmaker intermediary, and can be thus characterised as *market-mediated access* (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012) rather than auto-mediated P2P exchanges. However, given the rapid rise and worldwide dispersal of market-mediated or access-based business concepts, there is no widespread agreement on a single terminology.

On a slightly different note, strategic management and marketing literature have also addressed the shift from production to service societies, reconceptualising the market as an interaction platform (Normann & Ramirez, 1993; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), which opens up greater dialogic and collaborative value co-creation between firms and customers. Service marketers even go so far as to claim a paradigm shift from transaction exchange theory towards a *new, service-dominant logic* (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Lusch & Vargo, 2006). This perspective upgrades (earlier depicted as passive) customers to a more active role, highlighting their significance as repositories of intangible *operant resources* (i.e. knowledge, skills, competences). Although these thoughts bring important conceptual advances to marketing in regards to highlighting interactive value constellations, the kernel of value creation is still theorised as a market relationship (i.e. the provider-customer dyad), which neglects other collaborative formats.

The term ‘collaborative consumption’ was first coined by Felson and Spaeth (1978) who were interested in studies of joint and social consumption activities such as collaboratively buying a pitcher of beer as a more effective option than purchasing individual glasses. Published 20 years before the Internet, understandably there was no explicit focus on intermediation or technological platforms in their work. Botsman and Rogers (2011) appropriated and re-interpreted the term to include both auto-mediated and market-mediated monetised ‘sharing, bartering, lending, trading, gifting and swapping activities’. For Botsman, collaborative consumption represents a superior and enlightened economy: ‘a system activating the untapped resources of assets through models and marketplaces that enable greater efficiency and access’ (*ibid*: 24). Belk (2014b:1597) finds this to be a ‘mis-specified’ use of the term because ‘it is too broad and mixes marketplace exchange, gift-giving, and sharing’. Indeed, some forms of collaborative consumption such as couchsurfing do not involve monetised transactions and explicitly forbid it. Instead, Belk offers an inclusive definition: “people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation” (2014b:1597). Such a definition, he argues, is superior because it incorporates both monetised exchange and sharing. So, even in its short life, these definitional debates illustrate that the term is already embedded with multiple meanings, and has been distanced from Felson & Spaeth’s original conceptualisation. More recently, a new term *collaborative economy* (subsequently used in this paper) has gained momentum in an effort to recognise that these collaborative constellations also extend beyond consumption. The collaborative economy denotes the use of “internet technologies to connect distributed groups of people to make better use of skills, goods and other useful things” (Stokes, Clarence, & Rinne, 2014:10).

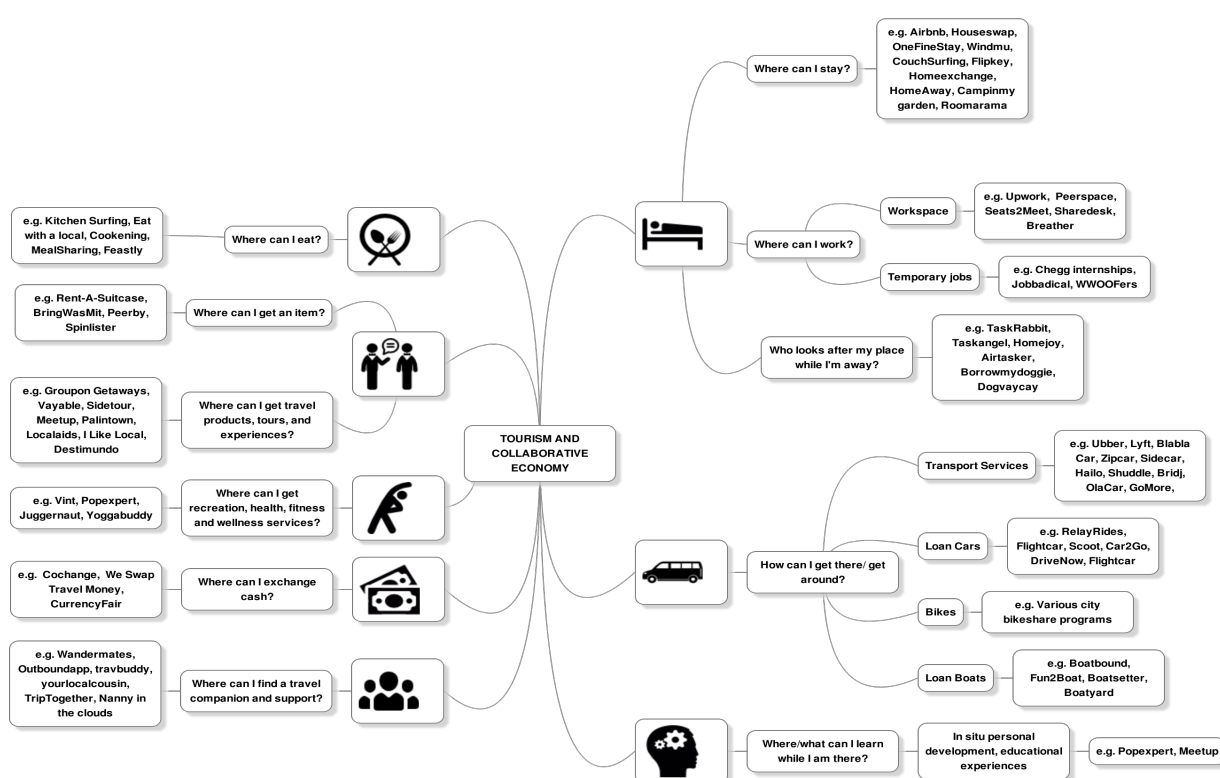
It seems that definitional debates struggle to capture technology-facilitated transactions and longer-term relationships in both marketplace exchanges and the temporary sharing or pooling of resources. Conceptualisations are primarily directed at connecting with historical lines of thought, or to reflect business logics including digital intermediation and interconnectedness, temporary access and exchange of possessions, and the effective mobilisation of idle resources. Underlying the discourse is also an unquestioned neoclassic notion of ‘perfect markets’, and an uneven emphasis on the buyer-seller dyad to explain market mechanisms. Complex, contested and asymmetry-ridden relationships among actors (i.e. producers, consumers, intermediaries, governments and civil society) are not

problematised, and there is no acknowledgement of fundamentally different rationales underpinning collaborative phenomena.

## The Collaborative Economy in Tourism

Tourism has traditionally been framed as an industry, and governments have commonly responded with a range of neoliberal industry policy measures aimed at boosting investment, increasing competitiveness, marketing and promotion to increase consumer awareness, and reducing barriers to growth (Dredge & Jenkins, 2007; Halkier, 2010). However, growing concerns over environmental impacts and resource depletion, climate change, poverty and persistent financial crises have prompted calls for alternative socio-political models of tourism that can more effectively address sustainable development (Burns & Bibbings, 2009; Mosedale, 2012). It is within this ideological space that the collaborative economy has gained momentum in tourism. Figure 1 shows the potential extent of collaborative opportunities in tourism from the consumer's perspective, and identifies examples in food, travel services, health and wellness, currency exchange, travel companions and support, accommodation and work space, transport and education.

Figure 1 – The collaborative economy and tourism



Source icons by Freepik

This growth of the collaborative economy in tourism has emerged as a response to several problems characterising the traditional tourism industrial system. First, redundancy is present in existing tourism systems in the form of dead capital, idling assets and latent expertise. For example, local expertise and knowledge can be monetised by offering guided tours or dining

experiences with local hosts. Empty apartments, rooms and couches, idle cars, bicycles and boats can all now be accessed by visitors in a destination using the technology-mediated platforms indicated in Figure 1. According to protagonists, not only do these idling assets add product diversity, but they can also provide local actors, once previously excluded from the tourism economy, with the opportunity to generate economic and/or other benefits. Such opportunities can fuel entrepreneurialism and expand the scope of trade (Botsman, 2014a; Koopman et al. 2014).

Second, high transaction costs and distorted information between market actors in the traditional tourism industrial system can reduce trust and visitor satisfaction, push up costs, and inhibit repeat visitation. However, protagonists of the collaborative economy in tourism posit that tools such as peer-to-peer feedback, where both suppliers and consumers are rated, can build trust and facilitate authentic host-visitor relations not achievable within traditional tourism systems. It allows customers and providers to directly link enabling idling resources to be used, and it also minimises transaction costs. The ITB (2014: 27) explains: "...they [intermediaries] are attractive because they offer lower prices, better accessibility, ease of use and 'a user-focused mission' including transparency and interactive communication". This digital transparency and comparability of offers/prices benefits consumers, and increases the availability of niche products and specialised alternatives, including the return of 'genuine' cross-cultural encounters (Yannopoulou, 2013).

Third, asymmetries of regulation have impeded innovation, allowed some producers to capture and take advantage of regulations, and have restricted the entry of new entrepreneurs and ideas into the marketplace (Koopman et al, 2014). For instance, costs of insurance, accreditation, industry memberships, licenses and so on are passed onto consumers and built into pricing structures. In the accommodation sector, products can be overregulated by bureaucratic quality control systems and costly consumer and eco labelling. The result is an inhospitable hospitality industry (Ritzer, 2007). Mitchell (2014) explains further: "Uber is successful because it *isn't* a cartelized taxi company" and therefore it does not need to pass on the costs of heavy and cumbersome regulation. Regulations have a way of locking in the status quo and rendering innovation more difficult, whereas collaboration based around digital platforms offers greater flexibility and access to the marketplace.

Fourth, the preferences of the postmodern tourist extend beyond the streamlined and impersonal experiences, services and products often associated with the traditional industrial tourism system. Consuming travel is intimately bound to identity construction and narratives of authentic encounters with local cultures. Driven by the ambition of deviating from the beaten track, new generations of travellers are converging on digital platforms to retrieve recommendations and information from fellow travellers and local residents, i.e. sources other than traditional market intermediaries (ITB Berlin, 2014; World Travel Market, 2014), and to explore alternative experiences. Airbnb and other accommodation platforms offer opportunities for guests to stay in treehouses, refurbished jumbo jets, concrete drain pipes, vintage caravans and ski jumps, thereby meeting postmodern demands.

Fifth, destination competition and innovation in the traditional tourism system can be thwarted by difficulties in attracting capital investment or by what bankers might consider 'safe' investments. As Botsman (2014b) explains: "Airbnb's model is 'asset light'; it does not

need to build or own inventory, but instead facilities access to existing assets, such as spare rooms, holiday houses, entire islands or treehouses”. In this way, the collaborative economy offers a way of overcoming barriers to innovation, investment and product diversity.

However, despite that the collaborative economy appears to be addressing these limitations of the existing industrial tourism system in creative and disruptive ways, the impacts, opportunities and threats of the collaborative economy are not fully understood. Nevertheless, it continues to hurtle forward with some estimating that the collaborative economy now accounts for approximately 40% of the overall world outbound accommodation market (ITB Berlin, 2014). However, we know little about its wider impacts on local, regional and national economies and whether (or how) it might lead to the restructuring of tourism systems. We know even less about how it will affect citizens and communities in different geographical settings, or how it will transform guest-host relationships.

## **Discussion: A Critical Perspective on the Collaborative Economy**

Our mapping of the knowledge field above has identified significant asymmetries of knowledge manifested in both the limited presence of perspectives beyond the proponents of the collaborative economy, and in the partial and incomplete knowledge available. Adopting a critical perspective, it is possible to identify five claims consistently reiterated in current debates, and to identify opportunities for a more agnostic, independent scholarship in the future.

### **Social technologies unlock hidden wealth?**

One of the greatest mantras of the collaborative economy is the promise of unlocking the untapped/underutilised social, economic and environmental values in idle resources (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Owners of idle assets can set up mini-businesses and consumers become active information brokers by producing content and sharing their experiences online so that both become active agents in the transaction process. Arguing along technotopian lines, new technologies are bringing together multiple customers and providers to engage in effective and trusting relationships (Koopman et al., 2014; Porter & Cramer, 2011). Not only do social technologies allow for an expanded range of goods and services, they also reduce the transaction and bargaining costs related to their purchase. Online reviews and reputational feedback mechanisms supposedly enhance the transparency of commercial exchange, empowering consumers through networking tools to inform and influence the decisions of subsequent peers. Furthermore, ubiquitous digital tracking and recording systems provide data about individuals’ whereabouts to protect them in case of abuse or fraud (Mitchell, 2014).

However, we should be cautious about being lulled by smart technological opportunities leading to greater consumer welfare. Critical digital tourism researchers warn about the illusion of participation, crowd power and customer sovereignty (Munar & Gyimóthy, 2013). The untrustworthiness of online ratings and reviews aggregating the evaluation of past consumers has been aptly demonstrated, with illustrations of deceptive opinion spams and the creation of ‘front peer cartels’. Social technologies are neither transparent nor emancipatory;

rather they produce and demonstrate new types of power asymmetries, social hierarchies and influential positions (Labrecque, Esche, Mathwick, Nowak & Hofacker, 2013).

The above suggests that information asymmetries and trust uncertainties between peers, as buyers and sellers, remains on collaborative platforms. Unless peers are connected in a closed membership group, their exchange will likely be mediated by commercial intermediaries. The innovative potential is claimed to reside in (empowered) customers, (resilient) communities or (entrepreneurial) owners unlocking their idle assets. However, it is the intermediaries who connect those actors into new 'circuits of commerce' (Zelizer, 2010), and who convert, circulate and capitalise on the non-monetary potentials of idling assets. Intermediaries facilitating sharing or collaboration between strangers 'own' these relationships; they define the rules, guaranties and regulatory framework, and allocate liabilities and risks. Trust and social control are commodified in complex operational procedures and codebooks, and the medium of exchange is, in most cases, monetary. This suggests that there is a need for thorough studies to understand and conceptualise bonding, power constellations and control mechanisms in the virtual sphere rather than just taking fairness for granted.

### **More equal distribution of benefits?**

The collaborative economy is claimed to be communitarian (Stokes et al. 2014), embracing openness, inclusivity and the commons; it reallocates wealth across the value chain, and it carries the seeds of a more fair, just and equal society. So far, these promises have not been substantiated and the first quantitative studies capturing the collaborative economy reveal a number of biases. In the UK, two thirds of the population is claimed to engage in collaborative activities, but there is a significant demographic bias (Stokes et al., 2014). The economically active urban population in managerial, professional and administrative jobs have a much higher propensity to participate in the collaborative economy than their rural, ethnic, unemployed or pensioned compatriots (see also Tussyadiah, 2015). The collaborative phenomenon may be a hipster (rather than survival) phenomenon: driven and benefited by people with high cultural, digital and networking capital.

Furthermore, the spreading and uptake of the collaborative economy is spatially uneven. Taking the example of AirBnB, the most incredible aspect of the company's viral explosion is not its global reach or the volume of guest nights, but its uneven dispersal. The density of shared accommodation offerings is concentrated in major metropolitan areas or popular resorts, suggesting a potential consequence of aggravating rather than levelling out demographic, societal and economic inequalities. Indeed, there is much discussion of Shareable Cities (Rinne, 2013), but there is not one single mention of the shareable countryside. Furthermore, the scope and distribution of benefits is never quantified and the contribution of the collaborative businesses to national economies remains speculative, suggesting the need for further investigation.

### **Resilient communities, authentic relationships and the moral economy?**

Related to the above is the claim that the collaborative economy focuses on community lifestyle and living local movements, it is an antidote to the failures of capitalism, and it contributes to a moral turn in consumer decision-making (Lau, 2015). It is claimed that the

collaborative economy creates resilient communities, it revitalises neighbourhoods, and it helps those in need. In this sense, the collaborative economy is often associated with a moral economy ‘that aligns with other alternative tourism projects in its rejection of supposedly impersonal and exploitive character of commercialized mass tourism’ (Germann Molz, 2013) and been cast as a saviour for those in need:

Hi Airbnb, I am not exaggerating when I tell you that you literally saved us... after losing both our jobs and our investment in the stock market crash last year. We slowly watched our savings dwindle to the point where we did not have enough money to pay our rent... I listed our apartment on your website and received so many requests... You have given us the ability to keep our home and travel together and the peace of mind of knowing we can make it through this challenging time in life (cited in Botsman and Rogers, 2010: xii)

There is also a certain romanticisation about ‘village-building’ and unmediated encounters between locals and tourists (the *raison d’être* of concepts like Vayable, Meet the Danes and Couchsurfing). However, opponents of the sharing economy are sceptical:

But our society is not returning to a past utopia of collective social confidence and equality because this utopia never existed. The sharing economy doesn’t build trust—it trades on cultural homogeneity and established social networks both online and in real life. Where it builds new connections, it often replicates old patterns of privileged access for some, and denial for others (Cagle, 2014).

Connecting with strangers and moments of shared intimacy are framed as the new tourism (Germann Molz, 2013), however such cultural encounters likely occur between like-minded and privileged members of the creative middle class, rather than low-income people. Not everyone in society can harness the option of sharing, yet the thresholds of entering the system are not questioned at all. Opponents also point to the observation that the benefits of the collaborative economy do not necessarily trickle down to the needy. Some partake in sharing out of necessity (Kassan & Orsi, 2012) or do not own any assets to be able to participate in the collaborative economy. Uber and Lyft drivers offering rideshares in order to compensate underpaid jobs or unemployment are working without employment safety nets and union protection – reminiscent of the exploitative conditions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century labour market. Instead of the claims that the collaborative economy is an advanced form of enlightened capitalism, the collaborative economy may be ‘disaster capitalism’ (Cagle, 2014). Labour market researchers predict a massive growth in the freelance, precarious and grey workforce, whose contribution to the wealth of the tourism industry has been historically acknowledged but under-problematised. Hence, instead of accepting the alluring arguments that the sharing economy contributes to a moral, altruistic or responsible turn, we should also turn our attention to understand how it compromises the livelihoods of the new working poor in economic, social and legal terms.

### **Invoking the ‘invisible hand’?**

Another claim relates to a view articulated that the collaborative economy is ‘going places where Adam Smith’s invisible hand cannot. [Sharing economy businesses] are recalibrating



supply and demand [...]. Instead of representing an entirely new underground economy, the companies of the sharing economy represent more of a supplement, adding capacity while driving down prices in ways that help consumers' (Basulto, 2013). Adam Smith (1776/1904) originally used the invisible hand metaphor to refer to the way in which, under a capitalist system with minimal regulation, people will work hard to pursue their own self-benefit and this prosperity contributes to a greater public good. By invoking Adam Smith's invisible hand, protagonists position the collaborative economy as a free unfettered market place where producers and consumers exchange goods and services and without the heavy-handed regulation. In this view, the collaborative economy provides potentially cheaper access to travel, to destinations and to services thereby unlocking latent demand. Hard work and innovation keep prices down. This application of Adam Smith's invisible hand logic is appealing for protagonists seeking to promote the free market exchange of goods and services mediated through social platforms, and it also assists arguments that the collaborative economy is and should remain unfettered by regulation. However, it is important to note that the existence and mooted benefits of the invisible hand have never been proven with some arguing that it focuses too much attention on the wealth generated through economic transactions and deflects attention away from the human dimensions of the free market and broader issues about what it is to have a flourishing society (Stiglitz, 1991). Moreover, it also marginalises governments and their responsibilities in shaping just, healthy and sustainable societies, and in protecting social welfare. Within a tourism context, employing these arguments effectively silences more nuanced understandings of the need for and challenges of regulation; it silences the voices of those not directly involved in the triadic relationship between consumer, intermediary and producer; and it silences the impacts on broader civil society.

### **Collaborative economy overcomes regulatory issues?**

Due to the alignment of collaborative economy discourse with a neoliberal free market ideology, early proponents of the collaborative economy were quick to claim that the collaborative economy possesses the capacity to self-regulate and address market failures. Mechanisms such as peer review and self-regulation (such as guidelines and codes of conduct) are said to provide this role. It has been claimed that traditional regulation was originally aimed at producing public benefit, but the 'capture' of regulation has often produced cronyism and rent-seeking behaviours that reduce competition, push up costs and impede entry into the market place, especially for start-ups (Koopman et al., 2014). Taxis, accommodation and tour guiding are particularly prone to this type of capture. Large firms are in a better position to navigate these regulations and influence regulators (Koopman et al., 2014). Large firms can also capture regulators through the provision of expertise and information to influence the shape of policy and regulations. Proponents of the collaborative economy argue that the collaborative economy's use of Internet platforms cannot be captured by regulation, they lower barriers to entry, increase competition, and improve access to information (Koopman et al., 2014:15).

This argument and the claim that collaborative economy avoids regulatory capture are misleading. That is, while the multitude of producers putting their idle assets online may not be able to capture regulation, a range of intermediaries, such as Airbnb, Lyft, and Uber, are currently exhibiting those very behaviours of regulatory capture. As previously discussed,

power and profit have shifted to the intermediaries, and many of these companies are using their expertise and information to ‘assist’ policy makers and regulators (Ha, 2013; Kerr, 2014; Stokes et al., 2014). From a critical perspective then, claims that the collaborative economy overcomes regulatory capture need to be further examined, and, in particular, an examination of the power and influence of intermediaries and their capture of regulators should be high on this agenda.

Adopting a critical perspective, discussions about the role of governments in the collaborative economy fall into two broad sets of considerations: the first is what is governments’ ideological position on the sharing economy taking into account public interest; the second is what should be done about it. Governments and policymakers engaging in partnerships with intermediaries such as Airbnb, Lyft and organisations such as the Collaborative Lab to develop policies and regulations are receiving a clear and unambiguous message: if the collaborative economy is to grow in the way that has been forecast, it needs to become mainstream. This requires governments to facilitate and support it by streamlining or liberalising existing regulatory environments, embracing it within their own operations, supporting start-ups, and sharing the message (Stokes et al., 2014; Woskow, 2014). The claim, tone and content of this discourse are set by an implicit assumption that the collaborative economy is good. As a result, the first set of ideological concerns about what should be the stance of government on the collaborative economy is silenced, and the focus falls on the second set of questions—how to support and facilitate it.

The scale and pace of collaborative economy growth has been so rapid that a range of market failures, ethical dilemmas and unintended consequences has emerged. New York City’s Attorney General Department has highlighted that accommodation sharing is a threat to the safety, affordability and the residential character of local communities, and it fuels a black market for unsafe hotels (New York State Department of the Attorney General, 2014). Moreover, the profitability of short-term rental accommodation is displacing long-term tenants and creating housing shortages for local populations. Ride sharing services such as Uber and Lyft have also come under increasing scrutiny as a result of serious breaches in safety and security (Kerr, 2014; Lehrer & Moylan, 2014). In the context of the asymmetries of knowledge already established, and a dearth of policy research and expertise, intermediaries such as Airbnb are currently stepping in as vicarious regulators, assigning responsibilities to both producers and consumers as demonstrated in Airbnb’s own communications to hosts:

Hosts should understand how the laws work in their respective cities. Some cities have laws that restrict their ability to host guests for short periods... In many cities, hosts must register, get a permit or obtain a license before listing a property or accepting guests. Certain types of short-term booking may be prohibited altogether. You acknowledge and agree that, to the maximum extent permitted by law, the entire risk out of your access to and use of the site, application and services, and your listing of any accommodations... remains with you (QTIC, 2014).

The above suggests that more detailed research is required that goes beyond simple questions about how to regulate using ‘light’ regulatory approaches. Critical questions need to be answered about whether the collaborative economy (partially or in its entirety) is *really* in the

public interest, and how is this public interest defined? Moreover, how can it be regulated considering the entire spectrum of policy instruments and tools available?

## Conclusions

This paper has explored the rise of the sharing economy in tourism, drawing theoretical and practical insights into the future of tourism in a world that is, paradoxically, both increasingly collaborative and individualized. The aims of the paper were to map current knowledge in tourism and the collaborative economy, to identify and critically discuss various claims being made, taking care to highlight silenced perspectives and issues, and to identify research opportunities. The term ‘collaborative economy’ was found to be difficult to define, imbued with meanings that intersect both with historical concepts such as the sharing, gift and barter economies, and contemporary collaborative business logic including digital intermediation and interconnectedness, temporary access and exchange of possessions, and the effective mobilisation of idle resources. The difficulties of definition also revealed complex, contested and asymmetrical emphases on different actors involved in collaborative consumption where there are fundamentally different rationales and structures underpinning collaborative phenomena. The focus of definitions is also largely on consumers, and to a lesser extent, producers. Little or no attention is given to the roles of intermediaries, governments and civil society, and their power relationships within the collaborative economy are not problematised. As a result, there is a clear need for more focused and critical attention not only to definitions, but also to acknowledge the diversity of phenomena under the umbrella of the collaborative economy.

Significant asymmetries of knowledge about the collaborative economy have been identified, which can be dated to the re-appropriation and re-framing of historically established sharing economy. The bursting of collaborative consumption onto the scene with its well-polished advocacy and informational campaigns, and the ensuing widespread enrolment of different actors who reiterate and recirculate commentary with respect to its benefits and advantages, mobilised and achieved Rachel Botsman’s ambition to turn the idea into a movement. The lack of clear, balanced information, where the interests of the knowledge producers are declared thwarts a proper evaluation of the impacts, opportunities and risks of the collaborative economy. In this context, we draw attention to the social and behavioural dimensions of fads, and ask whether the collaborative economy *really* is a social movement that solves pressing socio-economic global problems, or whether it is perhaps a business consultancy fad orchestrated by self-interested intermediaries and others who are positioned to gain. We lack the information to make such an assessment, or to determine the scope and longevity of its impacts on tourism. The truth is that whether the collaborative economy is good or bad, what are its advantages and disadvantages, who wins and who loses, have not been fully revealed much less researched.

This paper also identified and explored five key claims made within the existing knowledge base and which provide avenues of further investigation. Critical questions need to be answered about whether the collaborative economy (partially or in its entirety) is *really* in the broader public interest, or which interests it serves? Moreover, how can the collaborative economy be regulated considering the entire spectrum of policy instruments and tools

available? In sum, asking the question ‘How can we understand the disruptive power and opportunities claimed to reside by the collaborative economy’ requires the mobilisation of new ontological and epistemic approaches that capture the hybrid valuation systems emerging from the intersections between sharing cultures and post-industrial economies.

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