

# Rethinking the Sharing Economy

## The Nature and Organization of Sharing in the 2015 Refugee Crisis

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# RETHINKING THE SHARING ECONOMY: THE NATURE AND ORGANIZATION OF SHARING IN THE 2015 REFUGEE CRISIS

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## RETHINKING THE SHARING ECONOMY: THE NATURE AND ORGANIZATION OF SHARING IN THE 2015 REFUGEE CRISIS<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Our paper focuses on a non-standard sharing example that harbors the potential to disrupt received wisdom on the sharing economy. While originally entering the field to analyze, broadly from a governance perspective, how the 2015 refugee crisis was handled in Vienna, Austria, we found that the non-governmental organization *Train of Hope* – labeled as a ‘citizen start-up’ by City of Vienna officials – played an outstanding role in mastering the crisis. In a blog post during his visit in Vienna at the time, and experiencing the refugee crisis first-hand, it was actually Henry Mintzberg who suggested reading the phenomenon as part of the ‘sharing economy’. Continuing this innovative line of thought, we argue that our unusual case is in fact an excellent opportunity to discover important aspects about both the *nature* and *organization* of sharing. First, we uncover an additional dimension of sharing beyond the material sharing of resources (i.e., the *economic* dimension): the sharing of a distinct concern (i.e., the *moral* dimension of sharing). Our discovery exemplifies such a moral dimension that is rather different from the status quo materialistic treatments focusing on economic transactions and property rights arguments. Second, we hold that a particular form of organizing facilitates the sharing economy: the *sharing economy organization*. This particular organizational form is distinctive – at the same time selectively borrowing and skillfully combining features from platform organizations (e.g., use of technology as an intermediary for exchange and effective coordination, ability to tap into external resources) and social movements (e.g., mobilization, shared identity, collective action). It is a key quality of this form of organization to enable the balancing of the two dimensions inherent in the nature of sharing: economic and moral. Our paper contributes to this Special Issue of the *Academy of Management Discoveries* by highlighting and explaining the two-fold economic *and* moral nature of sharing and the organization of sharing between movement and platform.

**Keywords:** sharing economy; dimensions of sharing; sharing economy organization; social movements; platform organizations; collective action; refugee crisis

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*“This is a PPP of a different kind: a public-plural-partnership, agile and flexible – sharing the governing of a crisis. Why not? Isn’t this smart government? Much has been written about the sharing economy. But this is not like sharing lodging, as in Airbnb. It is about sharing concern, and help, and hope.”*

Henry Mintzberg, management scholar, & Wolfgang Müller, COO of the City of Vienna

Blogpost on governing the Vienna refugee crisis, autumn 2015<sup>2</sup>

### **Prologue: ‘sharing a crisis’**

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2015, history prepared itself to write history: on that day, the Austrian government, its administration, and major public and private institutions were surprised by Hungary’s prime minister Victor Orbán’s decision to temporally open the border for refugees waiting in his country to move on to Western Europe. Two trains from Budapest crowded with asylum seekers, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq arrived in Vienna. The carriages were so packed, one of our interviewees recollected (I), that the conductors refused to operate them as the doors would barely close. In several hastily assembled crisis management meetings government, public sector organizations, and NGOs discussed the situation and possible responses. It was estimated that about 2,000 refugees would arrive during the day. By the end of the day, 8,000 had crossed the border from Hungary to Austria and arrived at the *Westbahnhof*, one of the two main train stations in Vienna. After the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, Hungary closed the border and the stream of migration stopped – until Friday the 4<sup>th</sup> of September when the pressure of thousands of refugees in Hungary literally tore down fences and borders, and hundreds of thousands of refugees poured unregistered and uncontrolled into the West over the coming months. Indeed, the 31<sup>st</sup> of August was a day our interviewees would never forget: it marked the beginning of a migration stream that has been and still is a major political and economic challenge.

What had happened?<sup>3</sup> After the brief release on the 31<sup>st</sup>, the closure of the border increased the pressure in Budapest. At the local train station, several thousand (some sources speak of 3,000) refugees camped in terrible conditions. Their situation in Hungary was desperate: they could neither move forward – nor did they want to go back. On Friday the 4<sup>th</sup>, the situation escalated. A group of young refugees, including Mohammad Zatareih, decided to mobilize the migrants. Their idea was to start walking the 250 kilometers towards Vienna. Zatareih argued that if thousand people marched collectively, they could not be stopped by police forces. Equipped with a megaphone and various social media accounts, Zatareih and his associates started organizing the march. On Twitter it was tagged as #marchofhope.

*Insert link to video with Mohammad Zatareih: <http://www.zeit.de/2016/35/grenzoeffnung-fluechtlinge-september-2015-wochenende-angela-merkel-ungarn-oesterreich/komplettansicht>.*

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.druckerforum.org/blog/?p=1106>

<sup>3</sup> The following reconstruction of events in Hungary is mainly based on our own extensive media analysis, including articles such as *Was geschah wirklich?* in *Die Zeit* Nr. 35, 18.08.2016.

At 1pm, over 500 men, women, and children started walking, first on roads through the city with the aim to get onto highway M1 leading directly to the Austrian border. On M1, they encountered a police barrier, which they broke through. Zatareih was right: the refugees could not be stopped unless the police would resort to violence. The group kept on walking until night, covering more than 30 kilometers. Exhausted from the march they decided to sleep on the highway and continue their journey the next day. The atmosphere was extremely dense: refugees did not trust the police surrounding them, fearing they might be rounded up and brought to a detention facility during the night.

Meanwhile, politicians and the diplomatic apparatus sprang into action. At 7.30pm that same evening, a diplomatic cable from the Hungarian embassy arrived in the Austrian chancellery. The note informed the Austrian chancellor that several thousand refugees were marching towards the Austrian border with the aim to reach Germany. He called the German chancellor Angela Merkel and both agreed in their assessment of the situation: the refugees could only be stopped by use of force; and under no circumstance would they authorize this. They decided to open the borders and informed the Hungarian government about their decision. Hungary was quick to organize buses to transport the refugees to the Austrian border. At 30 minutes past midnight the first bus arrived on the M1. The refugees had no trust that the buses would take them to Austria. They decided to send scouts ahead who should confirm their safe arrival at the border. At 2.56am the refugees who stayed back received the redeeming call: the bus had reached Austria! At 4am that morning more and more buses drove up to the border. Back in Hungary, refugees learnt about the new situation and started organizing their own journeys. Barely 48 hours after the first bus, approximately 15,000 refugees had crossed the border into Austria.

Until the end of the year another 300,000 refugees were to follow. During the busiest periods around 6,000 refugees crossed the Austrian border daily. Throughout autumn of 2015 over 1.3 million overnight stays were counted in the 73 emergency shelters that were set up in Vienna.<sup>4</sup> Given these dimensions, the crisis represented an immense humanitarian and logistical challenge. Weakened through their long, arduous, and dangerous journeys, the refugees were in dire need of care, food, and shelter; moreover, the vast majority was looking for onward transport to Germany and Sweden as the desired destinations to seek asylum. Information about the number of arriving refugees remained highly uncertain throughout the crisis, which made planning and preparation difficult at best, and most of the time futile.

Consequently, the crisis also represented an immense challenge to established governance structures. The speed and size of the migration flows combined with the “legal vacuum” (as one of our interviewees described the situation) of how to deal with hundreds of thousands of unregistered, and hence administratively speaking, illegal

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<sup>4</sup> Data from the City of Vienna refugee crisis fact sheet.

refugees paralyzed the state administration. In fact, in September 2015 the Austrian state had lost what political scientists call “domestic sovereignty” understood as the “formal organization of political authority within the state and the ability of public authorities to exercise effective control within the border of their own polity” (Krasner, 1999, quoted in Börzel & Risse, 2016: 149). Major newspapers echoed that Austria and Germany had “lost control” over the crisis.<sup>5</sup>

As citizens we were deeply moved by these events; as researchers we were motivated to understand what unfolded in front of our eyes. In January 2016, we commenced with our swiftly organized research project entitled *Streams and structures: Interface management and collective action during the refugee crisis*. With a rather broad searchlight, the project’s aim was to shed light on the organization and governance of response strategies.

### **Framing our discovery**

What did we discover? To our surprise, the lack of response of established state institutions provided the space for an unconventional collective of actors to emerge. There was no single command and control center that orchestrated collective action during the crisis. Rather, an *ad hoc* governance structure emerged (Mintzberg, 2015) including public sector organizations such as the City of Vienna administration and the Austrian Railways (ÖBB), NGOs such as the Red Cross or the Caritas, private firms (such as IKEA and Erste Bank), and civil society organizations such as Train of Hope. Perhaps even more surprisingly, the theoretical framing for our study was suggested by the phenomenon itself: experiencing the crisis first-hand during his visit to Vienna in the autumn of 2015, Henry Mintzberg together with the COO of the City of Vienna, Wolfgang Müller (who played a leading role in the governance of the crisis), described the phenomenon as instantiation of the sharing economy, albeit “not like sharing lodging, as in Airbnb. It is about sharing concern, and help, and hope”. This form of “sharing” proved to be remarkably effective and agile, as Müller emphasized reflecting on the “civil society-start up” Train of Hope:

“In September alone, 109,000 working hours were provided, 180,000 meals handed out, and 4,800 people received medical care. We have these exact numbers because the civil society initiative [i.e., Train of Hope] run their own accounting. Mind you: Civil society, the crowd so to speak, organizes itself with lightening speed, provides a top-performance over months, and uses modern management instruments such as controlling. Here we have a citizen start-up that took over what are traditionally tasks of the state, such as refugee management and care. I have to confess that this surprised us quite a bit initially [...]. This was participation of a new kind: it was not the state that acted with citizens participating; rather, civil society acted with the support of the state.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> So the title of a newspaper series on the migration crisis in the well-respected German weekly *Die Zeit*, 2016. The Austrian newspaper *Die Presse* (20.8.2016) spoke of ‘state failure’ and ‘state authority failure’ (*Staatsversagen* and *Versagen von Autorität*).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with one of the authors for *Zeitschrift Führung + Organisation* 4/2016; translated by the authors.

Insert image 1: Train of Hope activists © Train of Hope / Nadja Hudovernik

Train of Hope took over state responsibilities and proved incredibly effective in addressing the crisis.<sup>7</sup> What was particularly impressive was the speed with which Train of Hope provided help; the breadth (for instance, Train of Hope could mobilize translators for almost every dialect spoken by refugees); and the depth (for instance, Train of Hope as the only hotspot ran a full-time care program for the entire duration of the crisis, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and primarily based on civil society resources). This reading of our case as innovative instantiation of the sharing economy was echoed in mass media, where Train of Hope was described as “Uberification” of help.<sup>8</sup> This inspired our twofold research question: First, as we did not observe “traditional” sharing as hitherto described in the sharing economy literature (i.e., sharing lodging or a car ride), what is – in conceptual terms – the nature of sharing as it actually took place in our case? Second, what specific organizational form supported this sharing of concern, help, and hope?

Analyzing our data led to two central discoveries as this paper’s contribution: First, we learn more about the *nature of sharing*: sharing comprises a material dimension covering the sharing of resources such as goods (food, accommodation) and services (translation, medical aid, care etc.). This sharing emphasizes the transactional and economic nature of sharing, which resonates well with extant research. But we also uncover a second dimension of sharing: the sharing of a concern. This moral dimension to the sharing economy is different from the status quo materialistic treatment focusing on economic transactions and property rights transferred via sharing platforms. Second, studying Train of Hope we find that a *sharing economy organization* (SEO) is a specific and distinct form of organization that facilitates the sharing economy. This particular organizational form combines features of platform organizations (such as the use of technology as an intermediary for exchange, the ability to tap into external resources) and social movements (such as mobilization, shared identity, collective action). It is a key quality of sharing economy organizations to enable the balancing of the economic and moral dimensions of sharing. Conceptually, we found this *mixtum compositum* of platform and movement enticing, for the majority of the literature on sharing ignores this organizationally novel link – despite claims of sharing economy players such as Airbnb considering themselves as “people-to-people movement” (see below).

What can we take away for the sharing economy debate from our unusual case? What we document is an alternative mode of sharing in the midst of a crisis that points towards a vision of the sharing economy beyond phenomena such as sharing lodging on Airbnb or sharing a ride on Uber. What we dissect from our narrative

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<sup>7</sup> This is evidenced by the prizes Train of Hope received, including the Dr. Karl Renner Prize of the City of Vienna (<https://www.wien.gv.at/kultur/abteilung/ehrungen/renner-preistraeger.html>), the Migration Award (<http://www.migaward.at>), and the Human Rights Award of the League of Human Rights (<http://www.liga.or.at>). Train of Hope also received global media coverage, including reports in the *New York Times* or the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, amongst others (see media section on <http://www.trainofhope.at>).

<sup>8</sup> See <http://mobil.derstandard.at/2000056740256/Den-privaten-Fluechtlingshelfern-geht-der-Atem-aus>.



(the value proposition of this paper, so to speak) is that we (a) stretch the imagination of management and organization theorists to think more broadly about the sharing economy. It is not just about business (as unusual as it may be); but how to think of sharing as a fundamental challenge (and opportunity) for the economic organization of society. This is significant (b) because the sharing economy features inherently a moral stance. This provides the opportunity, perhaps the obligation, to reflect more deeply on the nexus between society and economy under the premise of new forms of sharing. Which brings us to the final point (c): in order to understand the sharing economy writ large we suggest examining the organizational form that enables effective orchestration of sharing as distributed collective action – a quest that focuses on the combination of platform organizations and social movements.

In sum, our paper offers a documentation and diagnosis of an alternative reading of sharing and its organization, in the hope that it will, in line with the *Academy of Management Discoveries*' mission (see Arino, LeBaron, & Milliken's editorial paper, 2016) spark productive questions for further downstream conceptualization and empirical exploration of the sharing economy. Such future theorization might refine (or refute) what this paper claims: that in order to fully grasp the sharing economy we need a novel conceptualization of sharing covering both its economic and moral dimension; and that we need to reflect on the organizational form that supports this sharing borrowing from platform organizations and social movements alike. Such conceptualization might also make sharing a vision for addressing grand societal challenges such as the refugee crisis: for sharing a spare bedroom the study of the economic dimension of sharing at Airbnb will deliver a sufficient blueprint; for sharing society's dreams and keeping its nightmares at bay, we need to go beyond economic reasoning and invest more imagination into the sharing economy as a novel form of collective action enabled and held together by a shared moral concern and facilitated by a specific organizational form which we describe as sharing economy organization.

## **Theoretical context**

### *Sharing economy: tracing its contours*

According to the editors of this Special Issue (Laamanen, Pfeffer, Rong, & Van de Ven, 2016: 218), the sharing economy “can be defined as a socio-economic ecosystem that commonly uses information technologies to connect different stakeholders – individuals, companies, governments, and others – in order to make value by sharing their excess capacities for products and services”. This definition highlights the sharing economy as ecosystem. It focuses on the nature of the connections between actors who are engaged in sharing. Sharing transcends a single firm's boundaries and acknowledges a wider set of actors, including traditional organizations, but also consumers, intermediaries and others that play pivotal roles in value creation. Sundararajan (2016: 2) encapsulates this idea when he writes that the sharing economy is an early instance of a “future in which peer-to-peer exchange becomes increasingly prevalent, and the ‘crowd’ replaces the corporation at the center of capitalism”. Organizationally speaking, it has been suggested that the notion of platform captures the structural

features of the sharing economy (e.g., Srnicek, 2016). Platform organizations such as Airbnb or Uber are defined as digitally mediated interfaces or “matchmakers” between users who offer excess capacity and assets for others to use temporarily, buy or simply enjoy (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016). As such platforms present a distinct “new type of firm”, which provide “the [digital] infrastructure to intermediate between different groups” (Srnicek, 2016: 12). Because the Internet allows searching and matching on an unprecedented scale and scope (Benkler, 2011), platforms become an effective form of organizing exchange, including sharing. Moreover, Laamanen and his colleagues describe the ecosystem as socio-economic, implying that there are not only transactions across the ecosystem, but also interaction within the ecosystem that are significant for sharing to occur. Sharing relates to social obligations as well as economic interest – a fact underpinned by the importance of brands and “trust infrastructures” (Sundararajan, 2016; Kornberger, Pflueger, & Mouritsen, 2017) in which social cues take on the coordinating role that prices have in markets or managerial fiat in hierarchies (Benkler, 2002).

*Problematizing the sharing economy: point of departure and our research question*

A critical reading of the sharing economy literature reveals that the nature and organization of sharing seem undertheorized. The definition of sharing economy as ecosystem in which distributed actors exchange goods and services echoes the idea of markets as conventional form of coordination. For instance, Uber (Laamanen et al.’s example) acts as platform matching supply and demand. This creates what industrial economists have described as two-sided markets (Rochet & Tirole, 2003; Evans & Schmalensee, 2016). The idea of two-sided markets where an organization acts as intermediary (interface) to connect supply and demand is not new. For instance, credit card providers serve as early illustration of that principle (Castelle, 2016). Following this reading, Uber does not represent a new phenomenon – it merely extends the well-known principle of two-sided markets into a new domain – and in so doing Uber furthers the “marketization of everyday life” (Scholz, 2016). Such marketization of everyday life, critical scholars suggest, has little to do with sharing: rather they are purely transactional marketplaces where the sharing economy is reduced to an “on-demand service economy that set out to monetize services that were previously private” (Scholz, 2016: 2; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2015). In this critique the social obligation created through sharing is crowded out just like in other economic transactions. Davis (2016) described this as “Uberification”, a process of marketization of everyday life, which leads to pressure on suppliers – who in the case of Uber are individuals without regular incomes or social security net. In this reading the sharing economy is a novel form of exploitation (Scholz, 2016). The suggested remedy is that crucial ownership over platforms can be socialized, as the headline of an influential article suggests: *How platform coops can beat death stars like Uber to create a real sharing economy*.<sup>9</sup> This debate points at the hitherto unclear meaning of the concept of sharing – a rather problematic lacuna as the sharing concept supposedly carries the weight of distinguishing the sharing economy from other forms of economic exchange.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.shareable.net/blog/how-platform-coops-can-beat-death-stars-like-uber-to-create-a-real-sharing-economy>

A second concern relates to the notions of ownership and resources that underpin much of the concept of sharing (Belk, 2007; Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Belk, for instance, defines sharing as “the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use as well as the act and process of receiving something from others for our use” (2007: 127). This definition puts emphasis on several characteristics: sharing presupposes ownership of something. Belk stresses that “[f]or there to be sharing, there must first be feelings of possession, if not ownership. Otherwise we have nothing to share.” (2007: 131). Equally important is the notion of “use”. He argues that sharing is a form of distribution and hence located in the realm of consumption. Accordingly ownership precedes sharing because only what a person owns in the first place can be shared. This makes intuitive sense – as long as sharing is reduced to the sharing of material goods such as a drill or a flat; in these examples, sharing describes an organizational mechanism of making something (excess capacity) available to someone. But does this understanding of sharing account for the difference between sleeping in an Airbnb bed or a Hilton hotel room? Wouldn’t both cases be examples of making something available to somebody for a certain period of time? Perhaps the distinctive feature of sharing is to be found elsewhere: what is crucial is that on Airbnb preferences are shared, pictures of one’s private home are shared, location data about one’s whereabouts are shared, evaluations about the other person’s behaviors are shared and so on. Hence we suggest thinking about sharing more broadly than as sharing of material possessions. In order to be meaningful, sharing must include sharing of knowledge, information, values, preferences, etc. – a meaning of sharing that we are familiar with when it comes to cultures and communities. For example, in the literature on brand communities one of the key constituent features are shared values and the sense of a shared moral responsibility that constitutes a collective (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Here we encounter a different form of sharing – a sharing in which most importantly the act of sharing is constitutive of the collective (Kelty, 2008). Consequently sharing may be understood as generative act constituting social bonds, mutual obligations and collective identities rather than as legal regime of ownership, possession and usage over a given set of resources.

Casting these concerns on a big picture canvas: in the sharing economy literature we encounter the economic man and his “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another” that Adam Smith introduced us to some 250 years ago in his *Wealth of Nations*. Guided by his enlightened self-interest, this economic man relates to his fellow human beings through exchange of commodities giving rise to what Smith calls a “commercial society”. In this commercial society “the higgling and bargaining of the market [...] is sufficient for carrying on the business of common life” (1776/1994: 34-35). Indeed, the dominant concept of the sharing economy does not transcend Smith’s “higgling and bargaining”; rather, sharing describes an extended market facilitated by the Internet that is organized around accidental rather than planned excess capacity (as in Smith’s pin factory). Sharing means relating to each other through one’s interests in possession and usage of resources. Smith’s classic description of the economy captures the sharing economy as form of “marketization” of everyday life.

But can we think of the nature and organization of sharing differently? Our answer is a carefully optimistic “yes, we can”. Our focus on an unusual sharing phenomenon harbors the potential to disrupt received wisdom on the sharing economy. Prior to reporting in more detail from our discovery of the nature and organization of sharing during the crisis, we provide an account of empirical design in the next section.

### **Empirical design, data, and methods**

*Empirical setting: Train of Hope as a citizen start-up during the 2015 refugee crisis*

Every process of discovery is characterized by search and re-search (Arino et al., 2016), a back and forth between the laboratory and the library. Our investigation into the refugee crisis was entangled in such a back and forth process – a process that started with the dramatic events of early September 2015. While originally entering the field to analyze, from a governance perspective, how the crisis was handled in Vienna, we quickly realized that the non-governmental organization Train of Hope played an outstanding role in the mastering of the situation. Our empirical strategy followed our fascination with both Train of Hope as a civil society start-up as well as with the wider collective of actors sharing the governing of crisis. Remarkably, Train of Hope had the exclusive operational command at one of the two crisis hotspots: Vienna’s main train station (*Hauptbahnhof*). Actors such as the Austrian Railways, the police, or several City of Vienna Administration departments also supported Train of Hope in their daily activities at the train station.

Insert image 2: Arial photo of Vienna’s *Hauptbahnhof* showing part of Train of Hope’s operational center  
© Train of Hope / Nadja Hudovernik

*Data collection: media analysis and semi-structured interviews*

Our data collection started with a detailed media analysis in order to sensitize the research team for the specifics of the empirical setting and to reconstruct the sequence of events and decisions. It provided the context for the next step: a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with key decision-makers of all organizations centrally involved in the collective of actors handling the crisis in Vienna. In more detail, we interviewed 22 individuals and collected more than 20 hours of interview data. Eight of our interviewees were activist-managers of Train of Hope, all of them taking on leadership roles at the beginning and/or throughout the crisis. Other interview partners included top-level politicians and senior managers in the City of Vienna administration, managers of the Austrian Railways, senior decision-makers in the military and police force, as well as prominent NGO leaders.

All but two interviews could be recorded; in two cases interviewees insisted on not being recorded, which prompted us to take detailed notes. To ensure anonymity, we substituted interviewees’ names with letters and de-gendered them throughout the text. We sampled and recruited our interviewees through a snowballing technique, asking each participant for suggestions until we sensed that we had exhausted the potential for new interviewees and insights. This hints at the strength – and perhaps, at the same time, a potential weakness – of our approach: our narrative is that of decision-makers. Its value-add is the quality of insights, not the quantity of

information. This foregrounding of decision-makers implies that other voices – such as those of refugees, for instance – were somewhat backgrounded in our research.<sup>10</sup> Hence, an important caveat is to acknowledge that others' narrative might differ from that of our interviewees.

#### *Reconstructing our analytical narrative from qualitative data*

Responding to Arino et al.'s (2016) call for methodological authenticity and reflexivity, we need to reflect on the context of discovery of our story that differs from the context of presentation of our data. Our initial interest when entering the field was on interface management and collective action during the refugee crisis. In our interviews we were particularly attentive of how our informants reflected on the management of the crisis; how they thought about governance issues and their handling by the collective of actors involved; and how they observed (or actively organized) the sharing of hope and help. In other words, when we started our research in January 2016 we did not frame it explicitly as an investigation into sharing, let alone the sharing economy. As the quote at the outset of the manuscript aptly illustrates, observers of and actors in the crisis thought of the phenomenon as instantiation of the sharing economy, albeit with an important difference: it was not about sharing accommodation or a car ride – but sharing concern, hope, and help. With this new focus in mind, we re-examined our empirical material using an adapted analytical grid as presented in hermeneutic analysis (see, for instance, Lueger, Sandner, Meyer, & Hammerschmid, 2005). This meant that we interpreted our data asking questions related to our broad research interest, such as: how did Train of Hope emerge, operate, communicate, mobilize resources, interact with its external constituencies, and organize its internal processes? As features of the nature and organization of sharing emerged from our data, we put special focus on the dimensions of sharing and the organizational form supporting it. In more detail, we collected topics and themes related to the questions above, and aggregated them into insights on (a) the operation of Train of Hope and, more abstractly, the characteristics of its organizational form; and (b) the different aspects and nature of sharing itself. We compared and discussed these themes and topics to arrive at a shared understanding of our case. Hence our narrative is a result of an iterative process in which we interpreted our data through a 'sharing of a crisis' lens, which was grinded through detailed study of the literature on the sharing economy and finally polished into the narrative presented below.

### **Findings**

Reporting the findings from our fieldwork, we will argue that the novelty of our case lies in Train of Hope's blending of elements of a social movement with elements from platform organizations, shedding light on the organizational form underpinning sharing. Secondly, our narrative investigates the nature of sharing, putting emphasis on its economic *and* moral dimension.

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<sup>10</sup> Especially giving voice to refugees could have been an interesting extension of our project; however, it proved difficult to interview desperate and often traumatized refugees speaking limited English about the organization of help they were receiving.

### *Train of Hope: mobilizing like a social movement*

Sharing economy actors such as Uber or Airbnb are usually framed as technological break-throughs of college dropouts turned millionaires with the help of angel investor billionaires. Although labeled the “uberification of help” in the popular press and represented as “civil society start-up” (C), Train of Hope could not be more different. It was born in response to the burgeoning refugee crisis. During the first days of the crisis in September 2015, public authorities, aid organizations and Austrian Railways planned to organize one central hotspot (the *Westbahnhof*) for all arriving refugees (I). As one railway manager explained, maintaining and running two hot spots seemed beyond the capabilities and resources of actors in charge of crisis management. But refugees did not only arrive by train that could be controlled by Austrian Railways; many organized their own journey to Vienna by taxi or other means of transport. Often, these refugees chose Vienna’s main train station as destination. Hence, during the first days of September, thousands of refugees “stranded” at the *Hauptbahnhof*, turning it de-facto into the second crisis hotspot.

Train of Hope was the first to react and be present at the *Hauptbahnhof*. Train of Hope was “civil society in its pure form” (SK) as it consisted exclusively of activists and volunteers. One of our interviewees (H) recollected the beginnings of Train of Hope in early September: it was only a handful of concerned activists gathering at the *Hauptbahnhof* buying water for waiting refugees and onward tickets for refugees travelling further. One of our interviewees (H) recalled that on the first day they were five activists, the next day ten, then one hundred – a process that s/he described as “natural flow”, a quite organic emergence that responded to the growing task at hand: “The first five people [at the train station] were surprising, the next ten people too, but the following hundred or thousand not” our informant told us. Another interviewee (P) explained how s/he joined Train of Hope: a friend who had already spent many hours non-stop at the train station asked her/him whether s/he could relieve him; our interviewee agreed and on the following day s/he was already training new people. This organic growth happened mainly through recruitment through Facebook where early activists posted news and asked for help. Recruitment via Facebook meant that “politically like-minded” people of “similar age” (S) joined the movement as recruitment worked its way through “networks of networks” (Snow, Zurcher, & Eklund-Olson, 1980). For instance, the Social Media team consisted mainly of students from the art school; they were well-versed in the use of social media and some had a background in creative production (of film, photo shoots etc.). Hence, within a few days Train of Hope developed from a small civil society start-up into a broad movement with hundreds of thousands of activists and followers that supported it through “sharing a concern” – a crisis that within a few weeks had grown to historic dimensions and showed no sign of coming to an end anytime soon.

Train of Hope’s structure evolved with the task: on the first days Train of Hope only consisted of a few friends doing what they could without paying much attention to organization. By early September Train of Hope

reached some 300,000 supporters through its social media channels (statistics provided by P) and had 50,000 active followers on its Facebook site. By then, Train of Hope also had a basic structure, routines and practices of how things got done, and a few (if informal) rules in place. How did Train of Hope operate (see fact box for an overview)?

- Insert Figure 1: Train of Hope Fact Box about here -

The main work with refugees took place at their point of arrival, Vienna's *Hauptbahnhof*. This newly built train station had been opened in October 2014, just a year prior to the crisis. It provided the place and local context for Train of Hope's operations. The tasks at the train station were manifold: food in large quantities needed to be prepared, clothes in all sizes needed to be provided, tickets or special trains for onward transport needed to be organized, and if not possible to do so on the day, overnight accommodation needed to be arranged for. In other, less frequent instances, Train of Hope arranged for medical care in hospitals (in the case of pregnant women, for instance) or facilitated interaction between local authorities and refugees (such as those applying for visas in Austria). In order to deal with these tasks a basic organizational structure emerged: more than 20 "departments" (R) were established each focusing on a functional area such as food, clothing, transport, translation, communication (website and social media) etc.

Insert image 3: Train of Hope's legal "department" © Train of Hope / Nadja Hudovernik

Each "department" was lead by a group of people who organized activities and ensured ongoing operations. One interviewee (U) estimated that there were about 100 core members that actively managed operations. Asked about how Train of Hope selected these informal leaders, our informants replied that activists who spent most time and showed most commitment naturally presented themselves as leaders (although the term "leader" itself was contested and not used in practice). Departments differed in size: for instance, the translation team included some 400 volunteers, while the communications team was a close-knit group of about 15 to 20 people.

Externally, Train of Hope had several important interfaces that connected it with its environment. Vis-à-vis other organizations such as the City of Vienna, the police or the Austrian Railways a small group represented Train of Hope. This small group was not elected nor formally appointed: rather, it was the normative power of their factual ability to connect to and negotiate with senior politicians and executives that distinguished them as de-facto spokespersons of Train of Hope. Equally, if not more important was Train of Hope's interface to its resource base consisting of hundreds of thousands of followers. Interaction with its activists and supporters occurred mainly through the web portal <http://www.trainofhope.at> and its Facebook site.<sup>11</sup> Within five hours of going live the Train of Hope site had some 50,000 likes, indicating the tremendous reach and impact it had (Q).

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/trainofhope.wien/>

A third, more immediate communication channel was Train of Hope's Twitter account.<sup>12</sup> Through these online communication platforms Train of Hope posted what was needed and followers offered what they could share. With its ability to access and mobilize a vast resource base, this "matching" was Train of Hope's core organizational capability. It put Train of Hope in a position to coordinate the work at the *Hauptbahnhof* effectively, taking operational command over a crisis hotspot – something that is usually thought of as state responsibility.

When asking our interviewees for the reasons why Train of Hope gained momentum and traction so rapidly, they suggested that it was the moral cause which had attracted people: it was Train of *Hope* that mobilized people and it was this hope that activists and followers wanted to share with refugees. As one activist told us there was a shared sense "that history is being written here" (S), which, from his/her perspective, mobilized people to participate. Citizens were deeply moved, not at least by the framing of the crisis through the tragic events that preceded it; Train of Hope was there to seize the moment, becoming "one" with civil society as an interviewee from Train of Hope put it (U): "we *were* civil society". As another activist (S) told us, Train of Hope "took up a societal sentiment and used it [...] we drew on the overall sentiment and expanded this form of familiarly support". Train of Hope's thousands of activists and hundreds of thousands of supporters did not only share excess resources they possessed. They shared a moral concern: not only to provide basic care for those in need but to welcome them, make them feel safe, and, most importantly, give them *hope*.

On the one hand, this was a political statement critical of the immigration politics of the Hungarian government and the more liberal, but still restrictive Austrian federal government's policies. In this sense, Train of Hope was a political forum that provided the space for discussions about the responsibilities of politics and civil society. Was helping refugees a political act or a humanitarian deed? And if the latter, was it possible to act apolitically in the midst of a mass-migration crisis that had (global) political reasons? Activists within Train of Hope answered these questions differently: for some, Train of Hope's purpose was to help refugees and arrange itself with those in positions of power if it meant Train of Hope could increase its capacity to help through such arrangements. Others emphasized the political nature of the crisis and argued to keep distance to those who were, according to them, co-responsible for the crisis. Despite disagreement about this issue, Train of Hope shared a moral concern for refugees that united the collective "as if" it was one entity (Ortmann, 2004).

On the other hand, the notion of *hope* embodied the ambition to do better than established aid organizations such as the Caritas or the Red Cross. The argument was that many volunteers left these established NGOs and joined Train of Hope because volunteers did not want to work under what they perceived as little flexible regime (H). As an example, our interviewees mentioned that other aid organizations provided cold meals (which are

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<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/trainofhope>



easier to store than hot meals) for the refugees most of the time. Train of Hope criticized that as “sandwich, apple and water” approach arguing that help was not only about satisfying basic needs but to make refugees feel welcome – and part of that was providing warm food, as one of our Train of Hope interviewees told proudly: “Our food was like a four-star restaurant” accompanied by “five kinds of cakes” (V). It was this attention to seemingly small things that mattered for Train of Hope. As one interviewee explained, soap bubbles for kids were important because the smile that they put on a child’s face was just as essential as a meal or a blanket (V).

Insert images 5&6: Sharing hope © Train of Hope / Nadja Hudovernik

This strong, shared moral concern was the glue that attracted and held together an ever-growing number of activists, supporters and followers. It also gave rise to a strong sense of identity, which was the precondition for coordinated, collective action: recursively, the shared moral concern put the collective into, behind collective action.

The analytical point: Train of Hope’s strategic mobilization occurred through the moral concern that facilitated a shared framing of the situation. Such shared framing is a phenomenon that has been investigated in depth in the literature on social movements (e.g., Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986; Gamson, 1992; Klandermans, 1997; Tilly, 2013). In fact, Train of Hope shared many characteristics with a typical social movement. For instance, the shared framing around hope facilitated the development of a sense of identity across the rapidly growing number of people engaged with Train of Hope. There was a strong sense of acting as collective, as one of our interviewees recounted: with tears in his/her eyes s/he talked about the “incredible euphoria” s/he experienced after more than ten days and nights s/he had spent at the train station without going home; in the interview s/he said being part of Train of Hope was “addictive behaviour – no one wanted to go home” (Q). Another interviewee compared Train of Hope with the Occupy Movement: just like in the case of Occupy, Train of Hope was a “movement, a spirit, and despite all the tragic reasons it was also fun” (U). For him/her, the biggest challenge was to send people home after 15-hour shifts as most did not want to leave the train station. This movement character and the incredible motivation people brought with them was the most fascinating aspect of Train of Hope for him/her. However, this power to mobilize people and resources that resulted from Train of Hope’s movement character needed channeling; civil society’s appetite for the sharing of excess capacities and resources in form of accommodation, showers, language skill, or simply time needed to be coordinated. Train of Hope managed to do exactly this: it combined the agility and energy of a social movement with the effectiveness and resourcefulness of a platform organization. It is this second aspect to which we will turn to next.

*... and coordinating like a platform*

When asking one of its founders about the power of Train of Hope, s/he answered that Train of Hope was not a “factor of power, but a factor of reality” (*nicht Machtfaktor, sondern Realitätsfaktor*, H). What s/he meant by that was that Train of Hope was powerful because it had proven its ability to get things done, effectively, reliably, repeatedly. Etymologically, factor derives from the Latin word *facere*, meaning *to make*. And exactly this is what Train of Hope did: it created realities. With this capacity Train of Hope transcended social movements, which are usually concerned with contentious politics making claims (Tilly, 2013). Rather, Train of Hope turned itself into an effective sharing platform that channeled the energies of the crowd that gathered around the shared moral concern. Pointedly, media called this strategy of action Train of Hope’s “Uberification of help”. How did Train of Hope marshal the resources the crowd provided?

It was staggering to see the quantity and quality of resources shared by citizens. Train of Hope was the only organization that provided care for refugees throughout the entire period of the crisis, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Throughout the refugee crisis every day 150-200 people worked at the main train station as Train of Hope volunteers; during the busiest periods there were up to 300 people. In total there were about 5,000 to 6,000 active volunteers. As mentioned before, the translation team alone had about 400 volunteers speaking pretty much every dialect of any region refugees came from.

Insert image 4: Translators in action © Train of Hope / Nadja Hudovernik

Train of Hope could mobilize resources at virtually any time. Even at 3.30am when information about the pending arrival of a train was announced, a Tweet went out to the crowd and volunteers met at the station in time to take care of the new arrivals. Perhaps most impressively, having the operational command over the *Hauptbahnhof* meant that a civil society start-up with no history, no own resources to speak of, and little structures was put in charge of fulfilling responsibilities of the state.

Train of Hope’s effectiveness was due to its organization and use of technology, which paralleled conventional sharing platforms. Importantly, Train of Hope’s effectiveness was not based on owned resources but *access* to resources of its vast support network. One interviewee (U) stressed that Train of Hope offered innovative ways and means for people to share excess capacity and resources. In this sense, it resembled a two-sided market as it acted as intermediary to connect users: as platform it provided access to someone else’s resources for a particular period of time. Train of Hope’s unique capability was orchestrating and scaling this sharing. In essence, it represented an organizational mechanism of making something available to someone. One interviewee (S) reflected on this sharing that Train of Hope facilitated: sharing of overnight stays for refugees, sharing of showers, sharing of washing machines and many other things that were shared with refugees. The idea of Train of Hope functioned like a platform “similar to Airbnb”, he added. In his/her view, Train of Hope provided a

technology-mediated “sharing experience for participants” (S). How did Train of Hope as a sharing platform work? How were communication, collaboration and control on the platform organized (Kornberger, 2017)?

*Communication.* Like other sharing platforms, Train of Hope excelled in using digital interfaces that connected heterarchically distributed users with different resources through its platform. These interfaces included first and foremost Train of Hope’s website, as well as its Facebook and Twitter account. Through the use of these technologies Train of Hope reached a critical mass of some 300,000 supporters early on, orchestrating communication and sharing with them. Given the young age and the backgrounds of most activists it was little surprising, yet nonetheless impressive to see how social media was used as interface to make sharing happen: Facebook played an important role in recruiting volunteers, but also asking for sharing of needed goods (clothing, shoes, toys etc.), accommodation, opportunity for refugees to shower or wash their clothes and so on. Twitter was used by Train of Hope to mobilize sharing of needed items or skills that were required urgently. But also more mundane technologies such as Doodle were used innovatively to organize sharing: with Doodle, activists could enroll for work shifts to share their expertise in translation, cooking, medical aid, child care and so on.

During the crisis, Train of Hope’s interfaces for sharing proved to be agile and effective as they allowed tapping into and organizing resources of its 300,000 supporters. In this use of communication technology Train of Hope resembled other platforms, which rely on the Internet (web, social media) to organize sharing (Sundararajan, 2016). This use of technology differentiated Train of Hope from other, more traditional aid organizations such as the Caritas that relied on more bureaucratic structures to integrate external resources (such as applications for becoming a volunteer according to pre-conceived categories). Train of Hope’s use of communication technology also differed from social movements’ strategies: it did not use online channels to organize protests (as for example the Occupy movement or during the Arab Spring; see Earl & Kimport, 2011; Earl, McKee Hurwitz, Mesinas, Tolan, & Arlotti, 2013) but to orchestrate sharing of excess capacity and resources; Train of Hope’s business was not mobilizing protest, making claims and amplifying them through social media; rather, its business was mediating the sharing of hope, help and concern in the midst of a humanitarian crisis.

*Collaboration.* A second key question relates to how Train of Hope organized sharing and collaboration of its supporters, taken that those who shared and participated did not know each other, and had different levels of motivation, skills and commitment. In order to cope with the issue Train of Hope developed an architecture of participation tried and tested in other platform organizations. Key to organizing distributed collaboration on platforms is the modularity and granularity of tasks (Benkler, 2002; Baldwin & Clark, 2006). This modularity and granularity of sharing was key to Train of Hope’s attractiveness, as one interviewee explained: “Everybody can contribute, we’re finding a niche for them” (V). Another activist told that “everybody could re-invent him or herself anew [meaning they did not have to be experienced in refugee aid] and provide the skills that he or she

wanted to contribute most” (R). One interviewee emphasized that anyone could bring in their “passions”, from making music with refugees to translating local dialects (U). “Making helping easy” (Q) was another motto that we heard repeatedly during our interviews, emphasizing Train of Hope’s strategy that everyone’s input was welcome, no matter what they could contribute for how long (H, V). Train of Hope organized a flexible system in which a one-time donation was as much valued as a full-time commitment to work as translator at the train station. In this sense Train of Hope was a multidimensional sharing platform – share clothes, accommodation, skill as volunteer or doctor etc. – that allowed civil society to contribute all sorts of excess resources. This was a key differentiator of Train of Hope in comparison to other aid organizations. Most aid organizations featured standardized volunteering programs and enrollment procedures (with application forms, tests, background checks etc.) and static volunteering tasks that did not enable quick response and agility needed to respond to the unfolding crisis (B). In contradistinction, Train of Hope and its organization as platform on which users could share the resources they could muster was an effective form of crowd-mobilization and utilization.

In addition to the collaboration of activists and volunteers, Train of Hope also had to organize collaboration on an inter-organizational level. This “sharing the governing of the crisis” which differentiates Train of Hope from the more contentious character of social movements occurred through intermediaries (such as liaison officers mediating between Train of Hope, the City of Vienna, emergency response units etc.) and was facilitated through the use of joint infrastructure. For instance, the City of Vienna provided crucial infrastructure to Train of Hope, such as electricity, mobile toilets, cleaning and waste management, internet access, as well as administrative infrastructure (e.g., authorizing emergency accommodation). Infrastructure brought about convergence: it quite literally plugged Train of Hope into the existing network of power, transforming dependency into interdependency (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003) and by extension the civil society start-up into a trustworthy partner. Despite the initially critical encounters with the public authorities and rivaling NGOs, Train of Hope rapidly became an important actor in the collective that eventually shared the “governing of the crisis” and jointly formed the smart, flexible and agile form of Public-Private-Plural Partnership (PPP) that Mintzberg and Müller observed.

*Control.* A final issue was how Train of Hope as sharing platform could control the quality of inputs of those contributing to the platform. Again, Train of Hope used mechanisms deployed on other platforms to establish trust amongst strangers and mitigate risks. This was challenging, as many tasks such as the translating into a local language were extremely sensitive: the wrong word or a misunderstood connotation could lead to mass disobedience or even worse, mass panic (G, T). Perhaps even more sensitive was citizens’ sharing of their private accommodation with refugees: how to ensure that the host was not only willing but also capable of handling refugees who were socialized in different religious and cultural contexts, some being traumatized through violence and war waging in their home countries?

Our interviewees reported of volunteers that had to be dismissed, in rare cases the police had to be involved (B; K). “Volunteers are not only angels”, as one senior leader from an NGO reflected (A). Our Train of Hope interviewees agreed with this diagnosis; yet for them it was impossible to screen all resources shared by the crowd in advance. The solution was to “outsource” quality control, a mechanism well-developed at other platform organizations. Train of Hope accomplished its goal in a more analogue way, through peer control. For instance, when new translators shared their knowledge Train of Hope sent an already trusted translator along, checking informally upon the new colleague (T, U). This “trust infrastructure” (Sundararajan, 2016) of normative peer control allowed a “filtering” of competencies from translators sorting them into those who could cheer up children, others who could sort out legal issues with authorities and those being qualified to accompany a pregnant woman to hospital (I). In this nascent “trust infrastructure” Train of Hope resembled other sharing platforms such as Wikipedia where normative power and peer control form the main control mechanisms. And in this form of evaluating a plethora of diverse inputs, it differed from other aid organizations, which relied on bureaucratic command and control structures to judge quality of inputs and impact of outcomes.

In sum, Train of Hope’s power resided in its ability to effectively utilize and channel the energy and agility of the crowd. Its tremendous efficacy was a function of its platform organization features. As one interviewee reflected Train of Hope was effective “because it was not an organization and not a hierarchy” (S); rather, it worked like a platform in which a distributed set of users with different skills, commitments and motivations interacted with each other mediated through a digital platform owned and managed by Train of Hope. Recognizing this likeness with other sharing platforms, several of our interviewees called Train of Hope a “clever brand” (R, S) as it provided the mediating interface – the emotionally laden platform – for sharing to occur.

### *Sharing concern, help, and hope*

Our analysis illustrates the organization of sharing: Train of Hope was a distinct, specific organizational form borrowing from social movement and platform organization alike, thriving on the energy and agility of the former and the effectiveness and resourcefulness of the latter. This brings us into a position to draw together insights with regards to the nature of sharing itself. As critically discussed in the theory section, somehow ironically the notion of sharing is little reflected in the sharing economy literature. What were the meanings and dimensions of sharing that we discovered in our data?

On a first level, we observed the sharing of material (economic) resources on a mass-scale. Mediated by the platform, users provided access to resources (such as translation skills) and excess capacity (such as accommodation). Our observations reflect the basic definition of sharing as temporary or partial transfer of property rights: someone with ownership over something (a service or a good) made it available to someone else. This material dimension of sharing was extremely important as it provided the resource base for holistic care of thousands of refugees. For instance, several interviewees were both proud and puzzled how Train of Hope could

facilitate the sharing of expensive medical equipment such as ultrasound machines that were shared by third parties and located at an improvised “health care center” established at the train station.

But perhaps even more importantly, what we observed was that sharing harbored a second dimension – a dimension that transcended economic, transaction-based models of sharing and, in fact, provided the basis for the sharing of resources and excess capacity to occur. This second dimension was expressed as the sharing of hope, the sharing of responsibility, the sharing of a concern. The sharing of a concern embodied a moral dimension of sharing and it was this moral dimension that created a collective framing of the situation enabling the mobilization of resources and support. This moral dimension was also constitutive of Train of Hope’s collective identity: it was this shared sense of “writing of history” (S) that gave rise to a sense of “we-ness” and responsibility that urged Train of Hope to collaborate with other actors in the “sharing of the governing of the crisis” that Mintzberg and Müller reflected upon. Recursively, sharing engendered a public that in turn shared concern, help and hope.

Our analysis reveals a moral sharing dimension that is different from the status quo materialistic treatments of economic transactions in most sharing economy examples. In our case sharing referred to a moral obligation, a political idea(l) of helping refugees through the crisis. The moral dimension of sharing enrolled the public as interorganizational collective of actors in the sharing of the crisis. This form of sharing echoed the sharing of values, culture or a language within a community. The sharing of a language for instance could never be thought of as temporary or partial transfer of property rights as there is no “property” anyone could “own”. In fact, this form of sharing brings its object (values, culture, language) into existence through the act of sharing. The act of sharing extends and amplifies what is to be shared: with each additional person sharing a language, that language is enriched for all users. Sharing is not handing over something; rather it is weaving bonds between people. Economically speaking, sharing creates positive network effects. What is shared here can never be sold, but endlessly bought into. This hints at the potential of the sharing economy as alternative political economy that we will discuss in the final sections of this paper.

### **Lessons learnt: discussion and conclusion**

Arino et al. (2016) call for a “creative leap” that a single case study invites in order to arrive at some more general conclusions. Revisiting our research questions we have two such conclusions to offer: the first one concerns the organization of sharing while the second focuses on the nature of sharing; in conclusion we offer some reflections on the sharing economy writ large.

#### *The sharing economy organization (SEO)*

A first learning derives from reflections on Train of Hope’s organization of sharing. Our story suggests that sharing is underpinned by organizational mechanisms at work in social movements and in platform

organizations. Train of Hope manifests a distinct organizational form, which we described as sharing economy organization (SEO). Abstracting from our case, what are a SEO's key characteristics? And where and how does it depart from its siblings, social movements and platform organizations?

As our study shows, Train of Hope shared important characteristics with platform organizations: It was an “asset-light” organization with only a few full-time members; its power resided in its ability to access underutilized assets of hundreds of thousands of citizens who shared their know-how (e.g., language translation), their homes (e.g., overnight stays for refugees), goods (e.g., from food to medical equipment) and much more. Train of Hope mediated access to and channeled the flow of resources through its digital platform onto the physical platforms of the railway station where refugees arrived. It used communication technologies, modular collaboration and decentralized control mechanisms to manage activities performed by third parties. It represented a strong brand that citizens, politicians, business leaders and most importantly the refugees trusted. Train of Hope's efficacy was related to technology, or more precisely: its clever use of the Internet making sharing scalable. In all these aspects Train of Hope resembled transaction-based platforms. But Train of Hope also differed in other important respects. Platforms are two-sided markets in which users exchange underutilized assets or excess capacities. Platforms are engines of “marketization”: they turn what used to be outside of the market economy into commodities for exchange. Emptying your neighbor's mailbox while she is on holidays is no longer a valued favor but an evaluated (rated) transaction. In fact, the organization of sharing through platforms tends to “crowd out” other, common everyday forms of sharing.

Train of Hope countered this tendency through its closeness to a social movement. Most notably a shared collective identity and “collective action frame” (Snow et al., 1986; Klandermans, 1997) provided by the shared moral concern were characteristic of Train of Hope. Tragic external events such as the drowning of a young boy in the Mediterranean Sea in the summer 2015 and the 71 suffocated dead refugees found in the back of a truck on a highway near Vienna end of August 2015 contributed to the shared framing of the refugee crisis. Without doubt, this framing mobilized the public and its resources to support Train of Hope. The shared framing also equipped Train of Hope with a strong sense of identity, that created internal cohesion and the modularity and granularity of tasks gave everybody a sense of agency and of making a difference. In other words, sharing a moral concern and hope was the raw material out of which a collective action frame emerged: Train of Hope made as much as it embodied collective claims about the moral obligation to care for refugees and make them feel welcome.

Tarrow (1998) stresses the significance of “collective identity” for social movements, something that was equally fundamental to Train of Hope. It foregrounds the important question “[h]ow people actually manage acting together and becoming a ‘we’.” (Melucci, 1996: 15). Train of Hope acted “as if” (Ortmann, 2004) it was a “we” although as a matter of fact it did not know its members, had fluid boundaries, and no formal structure. But its

members did share the illusion of the “as if” which was key to Train of Hope’s internal organization as well as external status. This “as if” set in motion a self-reinforcing feedback loop, constituting what Kelty (2008: 28) described as “recursive public” which is a “public that is constituted by a shared concern for maintaining the means of association through which they come together as a public.” Train of Hope was such a recursive public in the sense that it formed around a shared concern that it embodied and symbolized. Our argument suggests that collective identity facilitated through shared framing underpins SEOs. Translated to other sharing economy actors: first, one shares the dream of a community of travelers (as opposed to tourists), and only then one shares a bedroom (resources) on Couchsurfing.com. The social movement literature with its focus on collective identity and shared framing for resource mobilization highlights this point.

But Train of Hope also differed in some important aspects from social movements. Snow, Soule, & Kriesi (2004: 3), quite prototypically, argue that “[s]ocial movements are one of the principal forms through which collectivities give voice to their grievances and concerns [...] by engaging in various types of collective action, such as protesting in the streets, that dramatize those grievances and concerns and demand that something [should] be done about them.” This description of social movements highlights two differences between movements and SEOs: First, as Snow et al. emphasized, movements are inherently antagonistic. They define the purpose of social movements as “challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based” (Snow et al., 2004: 11). Movements are a form of “social insurgency” as McAdam (1982/1999: 26) described them: “*all* social movements pose a threat to existing institutional arrangements in society” (emphasis in original). McAdam and Boudet (2012: 180) used “disruptive protests” (arrests, injury and property damage) as proxies for movement activities. More recent literature kept pursuing social insurgency as key driver of social movements, be it in the form of movements targeting organizations (Luders, 2006; King 2008; Weber, Rao, & Thomas, 2009) or movements disrupting existing conventions and institutions (Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003; Weber, Heinze, & DeSoucey, 2008). Train of Hope differed: it was not a form of “social insurgency” (McAdam (1982/1999) engaging in “disruptive action against elites, authorities, other groups and cultural codes” (Tarrow, 1998: 5). Rather than exercising contentious politics, it collaborated with public authorities most notably the City of Vienna. Train of Hope did not “call to arms” (Benford and Snow, 2000) but called to aid. The COO of the City stressed this point stating that “this was participation of a new kind: it was not the state that acted with citizens participating; rather, civil society acted with the support of the state.”

Second, Train of Hope transcended what the social movement literature has described as “repertoires of collective action” (Tilly, 1978) and what has been analyzed as movements’ “organizational repertoires” (Clemens, 1993, 1996). Train of Hope’s repertoire of collective action was not exhausted by organizing protests or demonstrations; and its organizational repertoire was not limited to forming a member network or a political party. Rather, Train of Hope extended the organizational repertoire of traditional movements by using the template of the platform to organize resource mobilization. Resource mobilization has always been a key



concern for movements (McCarthy & Zald, 1977); through using platform design Train of Hope excelled in this respect. Train of Hope made technology an integral part of its practice; it was not only a tool to organize online protest (Earl & Kimport, 2011) or coordinate demonstrations through Twitter (Earl et al., 2013). Indeed, Train of Hope was not in the business of “claim making” (Koopmans & Statham, 1999) or “dramatizing grievances” through protests and demonstrations. Train of Hope was much rather about the actual “production” of help – providing food, shelter, transport and care for hundreds of thousands of refugees. Instead of demanding that “something should be done” by someone else Train of Hope “did the doing”. The platform as innovative organizational repertoire allowed Train of Hope to go beyond making claims and instead it “made history” (S). To sum up, the sharing economy is facilitated by a distinct organizational form. This form borrows from platform organizations and social movements, balancing between Michel’s iron law of oligarchy and centrifugal forces that threaten to pull them apart (McAdam, 1982/1999: 56):

*Provocation 1: The organization of sharing is a balancing act between transaction-based platforms and interaction-oriented movements; the challenge for a sharing economy organization is to balance the sharing of excess resources and the sharing of a concern.*

#### *The nature of sharing*

Our narrative invites reflection on the nature of sharing in general: sharing we have argued includes sharing of a concern, a collective understanding (framing) of what is and what ought to be; and it is this form of sharing that is constitutive of collective identity (recursive public) and collective action. For sharing to occur, it is not enough that what is “yours could be mine” (Botsman & Rogers, 2010); there needs to be a sense of “what is ours” (Belk, 2014), something we have in common – a sense of what we share as collective that constitutes, and is constituted by, belonging to that collective. It is fundamentally about attachment to people, not to things (Belk, 2007). This highlights the second main learning of our paper: sharing is also about sharing values (such as hope) and concerns (such as helping through a crisis) – not only the sharing of material possessions; sharing, in other words, has a moral dimension to it that is crucial if we want to understand sharing as going beyond a purely economic transaction.

Early sharing economy examples emphasized this dimension. For instance, the founder of Couchsurfing.com, a platform where one can sleep on someone’s couch without money changing hands argued: “CouchSurfing had never been just a business. It was more like a movement, an army of four million members who behaved more like activists than consumers.” (Lapowsky, quoted in Belk, 2014: 8). Couchsurfers want to make friends in the first place, while a bed to sleep in is secondary to them (Sundararajan, 2016: 39). Of course, one form of sharing might crowd out the other, turning sharing into “pseudo-sharing” which Belk described as a “business relationship masquerading as communal sharing” (Belk, 2014: 11). It is characterized by “the presence of profit motives, the absence of feelings of community, and expectations of reciprocity” (Belk, 2014: 7). Here, the

movement-character of SEOs may tip towards an essentially transactional market- or platform-based exchange mechanism.

The commercial application of CouchSurfing, Airbnb, provides an interesting illustration of this point. Recently, Airbnb worked on its re-positioning as SEO balancing the moral and the economic dimensions of sharing. In an attempt to strengthen its position vis-à-vis municipal and state legislature, Airbnb explicitly argued for it to be understood as social movement-cum-platform organization sharing economic and moral concerns:

“Airbnb hosts and guests are not just a community, they represent a people-to-people movement that is getting stronger as the days grow longer. [...] In many ways, the organizing of our community into a movement has historical precedent. From guilds to unions, networks of people with shared economic and societal interests have come together to leverage the power of their voices. Today, Airbnb hosts — who earn 97 percent of the price of their listing — and Airbnb guests who use our platform to see the world are forming a powerful people-to-people based political advocacy bloc.”<sup>13</sup>

As problematic as such astroturfing of grass-root movements is, our point is that sharing is not only about materialistic transactions on a platform (e.g., Uber) but that sharing includes a moral dimension that finds expression in its movement-character. Note the vocabulary that Airbnb evokes to describe itself and explain sharing: people-to-people movement, community, unions as historical precedents, empowering voice, political advocacy – these terms give testimony to the economic *and* moral dimensions of sharing, underpinned by a specific organization form borrowing from movements and platforms alike.

This moral dimension of sharing is pivotal for understanding the proliferation and potential of the sharing economy. The sharing economy mobilizes and is built partly upon intrinsic motivation that a transactional, market-based exchange “crowds out”. It is this moral dimension that is responsible for sharing’s power, as Hirschman reminds us: “[T]he market, it seems, is not capable of tapping some very precious creative energies which will come forward only when they are *not* elicited by monetary rewards.” (1995: 214). A purely transactional market is a saboteur of effectiveness. For instance, Akerlof and Kranton (2010) argued that some of the most dangerous and demanding tasks in society (such as fire-fighting) are not (mainly) organized through monetary incentives but its opposite – volunteer work. You might save a person in a burning house because this is the right thing to do; but you would not run into a burning house risking your life for hundred dollars. There is a long lineage of work back to Titmuss’ study from 1970 on blood donation that demonstrates that shared collective identity can indeed tap into the “very precious creative energies” Hirschman spoke about. We confer that the nature of sharing is twofold: economic *and* moral, and that it is the moral dimension that allows the sharing economy to tap into the same precious creative energies. Losing this moral dimension, as we seem to

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<sup>13</sup> <https://san-francisco.airbnb.org/organizing-in-100-cities-the-airbnb-host-movement/>; accessed September 19 2017

witness in theory and practice, makes the sharing economy a two-sided market; in contrast, including the moral dimension opens the notion of sharing towards a political economy.

*Provocation 2: The nature of sharing is essentially twofold and encompasses both an economic and a moral dimension. It is the sharing of a moral concern that constitutes a collective, mobilizes the economic resources of this collective through digital platforms, and empowers the collective to address the shared concern. Research on the sharing economy therefore has to go beyond materialistic treatments focusing on economic transactions and property rights arguments in order to take into account the moral concern that is at the core of all instances of sharing.*

### **Epilogue: Towards an alternative reading of the sharing economy**

Our paper suggests a shift from an economic reading of sharing towards a political economy of sharing. In so doing our interpretation of sharing links to Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In his first book, published 17 years prior to his more famed *Wealth of Nations*, it is not the exchange of ideas but *sympathy* between people that creates cohesion in society. Smith wrote:

“How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it.” (1759/2011: 13).

It is this sharing of sympathy, or the “fellow feeling” (55) as Smith put it, that creates bonds between people and constitutes society – and not the exchange of commodities as he would postulate later in the *Wealth of Nations*. Our reading of the sharing economy and especially the moral dimension that underpins sharing echoes Smith and his correspondence theory as opposed to the commercial society analyzed in the *Wealth of Nations*; at the beginning of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is a shared concern – not as in the *Wealth of Nations* the division of labor.

Our paper is meant to spark curiosity along several possible lines of future inquiry: in essence sharing is about sharing of a concern or a moral cause as much as it is about the sharing of material resources. Our analysis stresses, first, the importance of a sense of collective identity that is key for mobilizing and activating the crowd. Therein lies the power of sharing: it taps into those precious creative energies that purely economic market transactions tend to crowd out. Future research into the sharing economy might focus on the two-dimensionality of sharing, how it is put into practice, and to which effect.

Second, enhanced through digital technology, platforms function as mediators for distributed production and collaborative consumption to take place. Technology allows scaling of efforts in an unprecedented way, giving the energy and agility of users a sustained strategic direction. Digital platforms are the mechanisms through

which sharing economy organizations utilize this power, acting strategically whilst drawing on a distributed, heterogeneous resource base. At the same time, SEOs borrow from social movements: they rely on the energy and agility of a collective that is characterized by a sense of “we-ness”. Future research could investigate this organizational form that we have started to portray and study the internal practices as well as institutional pressures that shape the evolution of SEOs between movements and platforms.

The previous two points emphasize that sharing is a dynamic, precarious process. Movements can fall apart or ossify; platforms can turn into labor markets for hitherto non-commercialized spheres of life. Sharing can turn into exchange of objects or sharing of values with little consequence. SEOs need to keep the balance between these dynamics. This point implies that sharing remains an act, a process – and not a static industry classification system. In fact, attempts to capture the sharing economy in quadrants (Botsman, 2013) or as honeycomb (Owyang, 2016) are failing attempts to arrest what is inherently dynamic. Future research could investigate this balancing act, focus on forces and mechanisms that enable balancing, develop archetypical SEO biographies and study what happens when the balance gets lost.

Finally, future research might want to study why and how the sharing economy provides the basis for a new political economy. Importantly, this was the initial claim of the sharing economy: to offer an alternative not outside, but within, contemporary capitalism. Our argument resurrects this claim: the shared concern constitutes a collective, a recursive public that subscribes first to the idea, and only afterwards to the service or experience provided by the platform. It is fundamentally an attachment to people and their concerns, not commodities that are the hallmark of the sharing economy. In other, perhaps shrewder words, the moral obligation inherent in sharing turns through consumption into a moral value-add that the market cannot provide. That is so to speak SEOs’ competitive advantage: they combine (political) voice with (economic) self-interest (Hirschman, 1970). Future research could investigate the constitution of recursive publics around sharing, and how shared moral concerns can be an effective way to address grand societal challenges.

What are the practical implications of our study? Sundararajan wrote (2016: 205) that “like most interesting things in life, the sharing economy is shaped by its internal contradictions”. Train of Hope managed to bring these contradictions into productive tension, and in the process of doing so, achieved something truly remarkable: as civil society start-up it stepped up when the structures of the state failed and, using sharing as its organizing principle, accomplished an incredibly difficult task under enormous pressure. Remember as Mintzberg and Müller noted, Train of Hope did not support the state in fulfilling its tasks, but it took over the state’s tasks. As citizens we think these contradictions and tensions are a reasonable price to pay for entertaining the hope of the sharing economy as powerful alternative mode of governing human affairs. Such a reading of the sharing economy needs to be based on the understanding of the economic and moral dimensions of sharing and SEOs’ design between movements and platforms. Based on such a revised understanding, the sharing economy

might become a practical contraption that does not concern itself with sharing a spare bedroom – but with sharing society’s dreams, and keeping its nightmares at bay.

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Figure 1: Train of Hope Fact box September until December 2015 (Data provided by Train of Hope)

#### **Refugees cared for**

- September: approx. 80,000 refugees
- October: approx. 60,000 refugees
- November: approx. 50.000 refugees

#### **Human resources and structure**

- Beginning of September until beginning of December: ca. 290,000 work hours at the *Hauptbahnhof*
- In September: 119,920 work hours; 84,000 of which through volunteers; 21,600 hours of translators; 14,320 hours of medically trained professionals
- Approx. 6,000 people actively working for Train of Hope
- Departments: hygiene, kitchen/food distribution, legal advice, child care, translation, transport logistics, infrastructure, info-desk, central registration desk, medical care, clothing, donations, storage/warehouse, social media, media and PR, missing people, front desk, volunteer coordination, accommodation service, mobile legal advice team, platform management at train station, organization and management of Train of Hope, security

#### **Performance**

- From September until December on average 3 tons of food were used daily
- On average 350 medical interventions per day
- During peak times 1,000 medical interventions per day
- During peak times 1,000 overnight stays at the *Hauptbahnhof*

Images 1-6 uploaded as separate files; all images © Train of Hope / Nadja Hudovernik

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