

Sharing Time: New Forms of Reciprocity in the Digital Economy

Di

Davide Arcidiacono (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore)

Antonello Podda (Università degli Studi di Cagliari)

1. Time Banks: From Offline to On-line.

More than eighty years ago, gift theory showed how free exchange was the basis for all social life (Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1924). Polanyi (1944) highlighted the function of reciprocity as a mechanism for regulating economic transaction systems that support and complement the functioning of redistribution and market trading.

Time banks (TB) were started in the early 90s as a social innovation tool based on reciprocity in contrast to the commodification of time resources. The TB system is a service that pools the scarce time resources of different people and redistributes them to support the needs of members of the TB community. Through the time bank, the members of a community exchange services without the need for actual money, the value being defined in terms of time resources that act as a type of substitute currency.

The literature on this issue is particularly well developed in English-speaking contexts where there is the most relevant experience of TBs. TBs are also considered a relevant "social capital builder" (Boyle, 2003, p. 254) that empowers the creation of social networks and includes an important social and emotional component. According to a survey about the "Let's" experience, 55 percent of respondents confirmed they had developed their network of friends and 75 percent developed self-help networks (Williams et al., 2001). TBs operate mainly in disadvantaged areas, and are confined to unskilled personal services often with a high dependence on public subsidies, which are required in to pay the costs of the so-called 'time-brokers' or salaried personnel required for the administration, maintenance and updating of the database of requests and offers, but also for the development and coordination of the network and its transactions (Seyfang 2004; Dittmer 2013; North 2014).

Time banks, as a transaction model and a relational tool, are now redefining themselves following the logic of the sharing economy and becoming Digital Time Banks (DTBs). It is evident that the Web has strengthened and given new life to these forms of reciprocity and sociability. Today we talk a lot about the collaborative digital economy, or peer-to-peer production systems (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006), as models of economic organisation based on sharing the over-capacity of goods or services and competence in peer networks, in a sort of hybridization between production and consumption (Dujarier, 2009) and between professionalism and hobbyists (Sandurajan, 2016). While traditionally, TBs concerned only a limited number of people usually confined to the neighbourhood of a big city (often peripheral, as shown by the Anglo-Saxon experience), or a small town, a school, or even a company, the new digital time banks (such as Cronobank, Bliive, TimeRepublik etc.) are reinventing and overcoming the service concept based on proximity or for a limited number of people, often elderly or with scarce economic resources. The digital time banks are more global operating in a "borderless" network, involving an unprecedented number of users, mostly the millennials, who are increasingly young and digitally capable, highly educated and who can exchange well qualified expertise. The members interact through the platform without the mediation of managers because the platform itself is organized to allow transaction matching without the necessity

for a time broker. The trust mechanisms between the parties are enabled through an online reputation rating. Some new DTBs are venture capital start-ups, and while not requiring money for their users they need to develop some strategies for profitability (Arcidiacono, 2016; Pais and Del Maral, 2016), through online advertising or by developing partnerships and collaborations with public and private companies, using for example, freemium accounts for specific targeted users.

2. Objectives and Method

This article focuses on the analysis of one of the more relevant time-banking online platforms, known as Time-Republik (TRK). TRK was created in 2013, with the aim of producing a system for a bank of time in a global, social and digital environment. In less than a year, there were 22,000 registered users distributed throughout 80 countries, with an average growth rate of approximately 30 users per day.

This study tries to analyse the social relationships built within the platform, by using a quali-quantitative approach. We consider the degree of embeddedness and the quality of exchanges and relationships established (Trobia, 2005). We try to test the hypothesis of the re-socialising function of these practices, which has been questioned by some studies into the sharing economy and online time banks.

In particular, we try to understand the real levels of interaction between users in terms of reciprocal transactions, and how variables such as nationality, type of exchanged expertise or reputational rating can affect these interactions. Finally, we attempt to understand whether the dimension of interaction on the platform generates social relationships outside the on-line platform.

The digital space provides an ideal observatory for the interaction between actors and the relational dynamics generated within the time bank. Every on-line action or interaction produces an extraordinary amount of data that represents an invaluable asset for research, and also contributes to redefining content, methods and analytical tools (Rogers, 2015; Cioffi-Revilla, 2010), which in turn encourages their combination for the understanding of the phenomenon.

The research combines social network analysis (SNA) on the embeddedness of networks (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005) using the net-nographic approach (Kozinets, 2009), and the use of the mystery shopping technique (Turner, 2007). In a logic of triangulation (Denzin, 2006) we have combined the information collected through the net-nographic approach with the quantitative data on the platform use, collected through a survey of users, with the aim of exploring the difference in the nature of relationships and interactions between the online and off-line dimensions. A sample of 238 users in five countries were surveyed. The completion of the questionnaire was done using the CAWI methodology - for all platform users - and therefore the result can, in part, be subject to a self-selection bias, in which respondents may represent the most active components of TRK.

We use, also, the network analysis from a "macro perspective", and focus on the structures within which individual actors are "embedded" (Podda, 2009). The embeddedness analysis can be helpful to understand the structure of relationships. The perspective we follow in this chapter seeks to understand and describe whole populations by the "texture" of the relations that constrain individual members (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005).