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Sharing in the New Economy: An Alternative for a Sustainable Future?

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Proponents of sustainable consumption have long endorsed the weakening of societal commitments favoring product ownership and the corresponding ascendancy of exchange relationships predicated on communal access. Concomitantly, the past several years have given rise to a new wave of Internet-enabled commerce that reconfigures customary systems for the usership of goods and services. Most sustainability proponents have encouraged this upsurge of interest in so-called collaborative consumption as a hopeful and positive development with some analyses even interpreting the renewal of sharing as early evidence that established consumerist lifestyles are starting to unwind. There is, though, an interesting paradox—namely the absence of much genuine sharing in the purported “sharing economy.” This presentation will highlight the empty promise of business models premised on the mutual utilization of products and explain how a small handful of crusading entrepreneurs has misconstrued these unfolding developments. The critique is premised on a two-dimensional taxonomy that distinguishes four different consumption modes based on ownership type (individual or conjoint) and ownership motivation (pecuniary or non-pecuniary). Applications from urban transportation are used to demonstrate the utility of this framework. The resultant analysis discloses the ersatz quality of most contemporary sharing activity and exposes its ineffectualness as a sustainability strategy.