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‘SEEDBOX HOGS’ AND ‘RATIO WHORES’: DISCUSSIONS OVER FILE SHARING STRATEGIES IN PRIVATE BITTORRENT COMMUNITIES

Nicholas A. John
Department of Communication,
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem,
Israel

This paper is about the ways that members of private BitTorrent sites talk about the mechanisms used to monitor the extent to which they are sharing files in a reciprocal fashion.

This is of significance for two main reasons. First, members-only file sharing sites constitute a relatively under-studied phenomenon in the context of research into file sharing. Looking at them more closely, we can ask whether the various mechanisms for requiring members to upload as much as they download—known as *share ratio enforcement* (SRE)—have unintended consequences and what implications this has for the widely held belief that, when sharing, one should not only take, but give as well. It turns out that in closed file-sharing communities, the commodity being shared is not actually files at all, but rather a proxy for currency in those communities, namely *share ratio*.

Second, file sharing is a site in which we can see the metaphor of ‘sharing’ at work and enquire into its *modus operandi* there, both by looking at the ways in which the word itself is used, as well as the ways it is explicitly highlighted as a resource in attempts to shape the moral contours of the file sharing endeavor. In this regard, the paper builds on previous work on sharing as a keyword for Web 2.0 (John, 2013), as a new/old form of distribution (Belk, 2010), and as a crucial metaphor in the term ‘file sharing’ (Gillespie, 2009; Litman, 2004; Mirghani, 2011; Yar, 2008). Also, while there have been studies on users’ motivations to upload and download copyright-protected content (Andersson, 2012; Andersson Schwarz & Larsson, 2014; Cenite, Wang, Peiwen, & Chan, 2009; Kinnally, Lacayo, McClung, & Sapolsky, 2008), file sharers’ conceptions and moral evaluations of the sociotechnical systems they use in order to access content have not been examined.

The empirical basis for the study is a qualitative analysis of 194 forum posts in three forums that debate share ratio enforcement mechanisms and 34 answers from the

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Research Bay project. All texts were imported into MAXQDA, software for qualitative analysis, where they were coded.

I do not have the space here to explain in detail how the combination of facets of the BitTorrent protocol (particularly the priority given to faster uploaders) and share ratio enforcement mechanisms (simply: don't download (much) more than you upload) create problems for users with relatively slow upload speeds. Very briefly, though, SRE can create a situation where some users have a very high share ratio and buffer, and can download whatever they want, while others have low ratio and buffer, and cannot. In other words, a situation of inequality emerges. The task here is to understand how file sharers discursively negotiate this inequality, with special reference to the concept of sharing.

Two main findings emerge from the forum posts. One is that, in private trackers, it does not matter *what* you share, but rather *how much* you share (or don't share). In their efforts to increase their share ratio, some users download content they have no interest whatsoever in consuming just so they can upload it back to other users; others download files they will never open merely so as to help other users to improve their share ratio. Another unintended consequence is that some file sharers feel that other file sharers are sharing too much (the 'seedbox hogs' and 'ratio whores'), and that sometimes the act of sharing—uploading content to other file sharers—is actually a selfish act that comes at the expense of others.

Second, it emerges from the forum posts that some users identify very strongly with the word 'sharing,' arguing that 'that is what it is all about,' for instance. For some, it seems that they take their lead from the term, 'file sharing.' If it is called 'file sharing,' they appear to think, then we should make sure that we are sharing. Others deploy the concept of sharing as they try to argue for a particular mechanism, usually one that involves the redistribution of share ratio and buffer in accordance to need, and not in proportion to how much has been paid for a seedbox. For these people, 'sharing' also expresses a form of ownership that counters that which is represented by the entertainment industry. Either way, 'sharing' is used as a concept that brings to mind 'caring,' and fairness, and the very term itself is strategically deployed in the debates in the forums.

This study also demonstrates the significance of the concept of sharing in the digital age. As with its use as the word that both describes and constructs our activities on social network sites (John, 2013), here too the concept of sharing plays a twofold role: on the one hand, it is a theoretical lens through which to interpret the activities of private BitTorrent sites and the discourses around them among their members, while on the other it is also and simultaneously a concept that frames the way that the users of those sites understand what they are doing there and that helps them to justify (or argue against) the rules regarding the distribution of share ratio. By shifting the focus of attention from the 'file' part of file sharing—which leads us to discuss issues regarding ownership of the file, the ease of duplicability of the file, and so on—to the 'sharing' part, this paper enables a richer understanding of an as-yet lesser understood aspect of file sharing.

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