How the Internet Helped Us Create the Sharing Economy
by Neal Gorenflo

In 1996, the poet and essayist John Perry Barlow published A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace. It was the height of the cyberutopian thinking in fashion at the time. It declared, "We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth." It foresaw a world of unfettered free speech, self-organized governance, and compassionate peer relations that needed to be kept separate from the laws of "meatspace." Barlow didn't anticipate how the Internet would eventually empower individuals even more offline than online.

Seventeen years later, freedoms online and off have deteriorated. During the time the Internet went mainstream, wealth disparities widened to historic proportions. Yes, individuals were empowered, but big corporations were empowered a lot more. While citizens watched cat videos on Youtube, corporations leveraged globalized financial markets and network technologies to amass unprecedented wealth while impoverishing the rest of us.

But then, around 2009, something began to change. Primed byfinancial need and the social media boom, people started to share more than just cat videos and haughty manifestos. A wave of new online services emerged that used the grammar of social media to help people share some of the essential resources of modern life: cars, skills, rides, experiences, housing, money, work, workspace, clothes, books, and more.

At the same time, the rapid adoption of smartphones turned sharing into a real-time, on-the-go, place-based experience. The Internet, instead of becoming a separate utopia, was unlocking the potential of individuals and idle physical assets in offline communities.

Network technologies, shared access business models, and dirt cheap production gear are giving individuals the same productive power and market access that only big corporations could command just a few years ago. In the midst of crisis, individuals are crafting a new lifestyle based on sharing that enables them not merely to survive, but to thrive.

Here are the stories of three individuals pioneering this new way of life.

David Lang: Zero to maker

When I first met David Lang, he was living illegally on a tiny, salvaged sailboat in the Berkeley Marina. He was 23. He had done everything right – went to a good college, got a plum entry-level job in real estate investment. It was so unfulfilling he left after six months. He didn't know what to do next career-wise, but did know he wanted to learn to sail. He moved to Berkeley from Wisconsin to work at a sailing school.

While learning to sail, David began charting a life path based on his passions. He began reading voraciously. He became a TED talk junkie. He was fascinated by the innovations democratizing the economy. He came to an event hosted byShareable—the web magazine I founded about the sharing economy—that was held at TechShop, a membership-based machine shop in San Francisco. He was fascinated with the creative possibilities and DIY community he found there.

When the sailing school laid him off, David promptly joined TechShop to learn how to make things with his hands. Members have access to design software, shop coaches, classes, and millions of dollars worth of machine tools. You can make just about anything in any medium there, from plastic, to wood, to fabric. For his first two months, he took every class they offered. A relentless online networker, he connected with O'Reilly Media and started a blog called Zero to Maker, where he chronicles his transformation from a Powerpoint jockey into a small manufacturer.

Shortly thereafter, he built a prototype of an open-source, underwater robot called OpenROV at TechShop with his friend Eric Stackpole. But OpenROV is not just a robot. It's also a global open source community that shares design files, knowledge, and skills to constantly improve the robot.

What started as a side project gained considerable momentum when OpenROV raised $110,000 on KickStarter. OpenROV struck a chord with hobbyists, educators, and scientists. Now OpenROV is David's full-time job. He recently shipped the first batch of robots, got a book deal with O'Reilly based on his Zero to Maker blog, and was awarded a prestigious TED fellowship.

Peg Powell: Sharing power user

I met Peg when I needed a car for the day. My wife uses the family car during the week, so if I need a car, I rent one. I used to go to Enterprise, but I got tired of the impersonal service, lines, and their robotic pitch for unnecessary insurance every time I rented. Frustrated, I decided to rent from a human.

I tried Getaround, a peer-to-peer car-sharing marketplace that enables you to rent a car to or from a neighbor. Getaround handles all the booking, insurance, and payments in an easy to use web service and smartphone app.

That's how I met Peg. Her Honda Accord was for rent on Getaround, just blocks away from our house. Over several rentals, I got to know her. She's a retired electrical engineer who has become an enthusiastic sharer. In addition to renting her car on Getaround, she rents her two spare bedrooms out on Airbnb, the popular person-to-person travel accommodation site. The extra income from renting her house and car has helped her stay current on her mortgage.

The last time I rented from Peg, she was on her front lawn prepping the car from the last renter. Her Airbnb guest walked out the front door to start her day as Peg handed me the keys. The three of us had a short chat before I left.

But it's not all about money. Peg also hosts potlucks every Sunday night for neighbors and renters. She keeps neighbors up on the latest sharing-related happenings, like the time she rallied them to donate to Hacker Dojo, the local hackerspace, to keep it open.

For Peg, sharing is smart and rewarding. It helps her meet expenses, while keeping her

meaningfully connected to others. And because of her, I know more of my neighbors, too.

Michael Keating: From sharing to entrepreneurial success

I met Michael at Hub SoMa, a San Francisco social enterprise co-working space where we're both members. He was just starting Scoot Networks. Scoot is a first-of-its-kind electric scooter sharing service that launched in San Francisco last September. It's like Zipcar, but for electric scooters—except that you check out scooters, navigate, monitor your speed, and pay for rental with your smartphone, which is held in special bracket where the speedometer normally goes as you ride.

Michael had been a management consultant, but wanted to start his own company. He saw an opportunity to make personal transportation in cities more affordable, green, and fun through shared access to electric scooters.

As his co-worker, I watched his business unfold almost since the beginning. He began working at Hub SoMa after graduating from a social enterprise accelerator program called Greenstart, which helps groups of entrepreneurs prepare their businesses to scale. He piloted Scoot out of Hub SoMa. He figured that people who share workspace would be more open to sharing scooters than the average citizen.

He bought three scooters to start, raised seed capital, and built a small team for the pilot, in which about 25 people tried the scooter sharing service. As you'd expect of an entrepreneur, Michael was resourceful. For instance, his team wore their bright red logo jackets at all times while working at Hub SoMa. They always sat next to the front door, the most trafficked area of the space. It was perfect advertising for the pilot, and totally free.

After a successful pilot, Scoot bought a shipment of 50 electric scooters to launch the service city-wide. They organized a launch event with San Francisco Mayor Edwin Lee and a scooter procession from City Hall down Market Street. Piloting in a co-working space was such a success that they decided to extend service to the dozens of co-working spaces in San Francisco as a next step toward city-wide adoption.

These are just three of many stories of how ordinary people are using network technologies to create, exchange, and share value in new and empowering ways.

The true transformational power of the Internet is just beginning to show, and it's not about the freedoms available on the Internet like Barlow thought. It's about how the Internet is unlocking the creative potential of individuals in real life.