Refuting the Sharing Economy: An Examination of Mainstream and Critical Perspectives

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Refuting the Sharing Economy: An Examination of Mainstream and Critical Perspectives

By

Samar El-Khatib

A Major Research Paper
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of Communication, Media and Film
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February 15th, 2018
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ABSTRACT

This Major Research Paper analyzes dominant corporate narratives of the sharing economy, as well as offers a critical perspective to the key tenants of this new economic model.

The study focuses on answering the following question: To what extent does the municipal government of Toronto’s Sharing Economy webpage provide a favourable representation of the sharing economy, one that aligns closely with the dominant corporate narrative?

With a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of The City of Toronto’s Sharing Economy webpage found within the Policy, Research, Public Consultation and Events section of their website, this research aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of the extent to which the dominant corporate narrative is embedded within this municipal government’s portrayal of the sharing economy.
In loving memory of my mother, Halima
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authors Declaration of Originatility</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Literature Review</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Analysis</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Conclusion</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Auctoris</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I. **Introduction**

While the volume of research about the sharing economy has begun to grow within the last few years, the literature in the academic field remains relatively new and underdeveloped. The sharing economy has disrupted existing industries and presented many legal and regulatory hurdles for cities around the world. The transportation and accommodation industries have most notably felt the impact with new competition from major sharing economy companies such as Uber Technologies Inc. (commonly referred to as simply, Uber) and Airbnb entering the marketplace.

A new form of “trust” (Bilal, et al., 2012) has developed in our society which has allowed for the functioning of this so-called sharing economy and its facilitation through digital communication technologies. Getting into a car with a stranger, letting a stranger stay at your house for a week, staying at a stranger’s house in a new city you have never been to, are just few examples of activities that may have been unheard of just years ago, but are now routine practice for millions of people across the world.

The sharing economy is generally defined as “peer-to-peer based activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing the access to goods and services, coordinated through community-based online services” (Hamari & al., 2015, p. 1). Alternative names include collaborative consumption, gig economy, platform economy and access economy (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2015). Although the language of altruism, community and generosity is often used to describe it, the sharing economy tends to deliver the opposite and is primarily made up of commercial organizations, rather than non-profits (Slee, 2016, p. 24).

Sharing economy giants such as Uber and Airbnb have particularly been the most recognized companies of this phenomenon with their popularity surpassing almost all other
sharing economy companies, such as ride sharing company Lyft and online marketplace TaskRabbit. With both companies disrupting the transportation and hospitality industries respectively, they have left cities and policy makers scrambling to regulate them, as well as provide some relief for the existing industries which are being disrupted and transformed.

Moreover, the precarious and non-traditional work environment that is being created is coming at a cost. Sharing economy workers are generally finding themselves earning lower wages, receiving little to no workplace benefits, having shorter and unstable job tenures, and even adverse health impacts (Becker & Rajwani, 2016).

This Major Research Paper will provide a framework for understanding the discourse of the sharing economy in Toronto, Ontario. The study begins by exploring the mainstream, common sense, economic view of the sharing economy which is feeding into the dominant discourse. After establishing the dominant narratives, a critical perspective is taken in order to reveal the monetary and capitalist foundations which are affecting workers and often go unmentioned within the dominant narrative.

Critically, this project explores facets of the sharing economy that bring into question the ethics of these companies. The communicative discourse around the sharing economy is often a positive one. There is frequently little to no mention of how this sort of new market could be harmful to society, or the fact that behind these peer-to-peer based sharing services are in fact corporations worth billions of dollars. Issues of labour and worker/consumer rights are often disregarded. The sharing economy promotes temporary and precarious labour, leaving workers without bargaining power or stable employment (Pasquale, 2016). Entrenched inequalities continue to exist in society regardless of the rhetoric of fairer labour markets with the advent of the so-called sharing economy.
II. Literature Review

Although the concept of sharing has existed in societies all around the world for thousands of years and is a foundational practice to all societies, a new form of economic activity has brought sharing to market through new communication technologies and platforms. Terms such as “collaborative economy” (Owyang, 2013), “on-demand economy” (Dixon, 2016) and “collaborative consumption” (Bostman & Rogers, 2010) tend to be used interchangeably by scholars and in mainstream accounts when describing the sharing economy and the sharing practices that take place. However, the terms do not share the same definitions or operate in the same way. For that reason, we will solely use the term “sharing economy” in this MRP. Several ideas and definitions provided by leading scholars on the sharing economy will be drawn upon to further explain and contextualize this phenomenon.

Defining the Sharing Economy: Dominant Narratives

Scholars Hamari, Sjöklint and Ukkonen describe today’s sharing economy as “peer-to-peer based activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing the access to goods and services, coordinated through community-based online services” (Hamari & al., 2015, p. 1). This definition is valuable to our understanding because this is generally how the so-called sharing economy is described in mainstream accounts. This tends to be the general dominant narrative of the sharing economy, one which highlights the centrality of online platforms but does nothing to mention the underlying corporate interests which exist. Moreover, the authors explain that “the development of information technologies alongside the growth of web 2.0 has enabled the development of online platforms that promote user-generated content, sharing, and collaboration (Kaplan &
Haenlein in Hamari & al., 2010, p. 2). These ideas are constantly perpetuated in mainstream accounts of the sharing economy.

A useful starting point to understand the growth of the web is the concept of “friction-free capitalism” introduced by Bill Gates, co-founder of Microsoft. He referred to this type of economy in a 1995 book entitled *The World Ahead* in which he promoted visions of technology and free-market economies. A friction-free economy was essentially an idea that technology would be doing everything for us in the future while eliminating barriers to online transactions. It would eventually result in a reduction of friction within the Internet economy (Basulto, 2011) that would typically slow down or stall commerce. Gates (1995) wrote: “(the internet) will carry us into a new world of low-friction, low-overhead capitalism, in which market information will be plentiful and transaction costs low” (p. 158).

The dominance of this idea remains the same but is now being considered in the context of the sharing economy. In 2015, Fortune Magazine published an article titled *Why Every Aspect of Your Business is About to Change*. In this article, the mainstream business magazine stated: “friction-free economy, a new world in which labor, information, and money move easily, cheaply, and almost instantly. Companies are forming starkly new, more fluid relationships with customers, workers, and owners; are rethinking the role of capital (as traditionally defined) …” (Colvin, 2015).

What needs to be considered is not only the way technology may alter the way sharing companies are functioning in comparison to traditional companies, but also what the effects and drawbacks of this are. Capitalism has led to the rise in platforms and sharing companies which has ultimately resulted in a change in the labour market and traditional workplaces. “In their haste to develop affordable, convenient and flexible virtual markets for on-demand goods and
services, intermediary platforms appear to have prioritized the values of entrepreneurship, innovation, and technology over government priorities such as consumer protection, economic growth, equity, labour, social security, tax compliance, and training” (Becker & Rajwani, 2016, p. 7). However, mainstream accounts tend to omit aspects such as these and focus solely on a glorified image of the sharing economy.

The idea surrounding the potential of technology and software remains to be perpetuated and the narrative still exists in dominant discourses of technology. As will be seen in the analysis section of this MRP, the idea of technology creating a smooth, “frictionless” market is present throughout several descriptions of the sharing economy, even within political and government discourse (City of Toronto, 2015). We are now seeing the same depiction of democratization that we once saw with web 2.0 in depictions of the sharing economy (Raju, 2014; Bostman & Rogers, 2010).

Furthermore, in order to fully understand the scope of the sharing economy, it is key to consider the classification of sharing transactions. Sharing economy activities can be organized in four categories: recirculation of goods, exchange of services, sharing of productive assets and increased utilization of durable assets (Schor, 2014, p. 2).

Companies such as eBay and Craigslist were the original platforms or marketplaces which facilitated the recirculation of goods and incorporated user-driven ecommerce. “These sites were propelled by nearly two decades of heavy acquisition of cheap imports that led to a proliferation of unwanted items (ibid). The goods tend to be second-hand or surplus items.

Next is service exchange. Generally, these are monetized exchanges of services which consists of people doing tasks for others. Currently in the sharing economy, the platform
TaskRabbit is the leader in this category with everything from grocery shopping for you and fixing things around the house being offered as services.

The third category we can identify is the sharing of productive assets. These are “efforts focused on sharing assets or space in order to enable production, rather than consumption” (p. 3). Generally, cooperatives are considered the traditional form of this type of sharing. “Related initiatives include hackerspaces, which grew out of informal computer hacking sessions; makerspaces, which provide shared tools; and co-working spaces, or communal offices. Other production sites include educational platforms such as Skillshare.com and Peer-to-Peer University that aim to supplant traditional educational institutions by democratizing access to skills and knowledge and promoting peer instruction” (p. 4).

The fourth and last type of platform is one that increases the utilization of durable assets which may otherwise go unused. Zipcar was the first of its kind to place vehicles in convenient urban locations and allows for rentals of these cars at an hourly rate. “After the 2009 recession, renting assets became more economically attractive, and similar initiatives proliferated” (p. 3). Since then we have seen similar companies in the transportation sector appear such as Uber and Lyft, which offer ride sharing services. Airbnb also falls under this type of platform, offering unused rooms and homes for rent.

**Crowd-Based Capitalism**

The sharing economy is also often referred to as “crowd-based capitalism” (Sundararajan, 2016). The sharing economy and “today’s technological shifts are steering us away from managerial capitalism and towards what many see as a more crowd-based iteration” (Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) Institute Contributor, 2017). Sundararajan (2016) advances the notion
that there are “new behaviors” that are leading everyone from the general public to policy makers to optimistically call the sharing economy “a future in which peer-to-peer exchange becomes increasingly prevalent, and the “crowd” replaces the corporation at the center of capitalism” (p. 2). Crowd based networks, he argues, are now able to compete with traditional businesses/corporations. However, “sharing” activities are not new. “If borrowing someone’s home, getting a ride, borrowing a car, sharing a meal (…) don’t seem especially new to you, it’s because they aren’t. Perhaps, then, what is new is the fact that this isn’t “gift economy” exchange, but mediated by money (…) while all of these examples do involve sharing, in a sense- of space, of a car, of food, of money, of time – none of these services are offered for free” (p. 4). As demonstrated through Sundararajan’s definition, the monetary and capitalist foundations of sharing economy companies are often not recognized in this dominant discourse, perhaps with the goal of protecting the interests of the corporation rather than offering a critical perspective.

Sundararajan (2016) also clarifies the early notions of the sharing economy and how they helped shape the current general understanding of the concept today. This is important because he ultimately represents dominant discourses. In order to understand sharing, he cites the work of Yochai Benkler’s *Sharing Nicely: On Shareable Foods and the Emergence of Sharing as a Modality of Economic Production* which was motivated by the growth of Wikipedia around 2001. Benkler notes the surge in “social sharing and exchange, and predicted that sharing would be at the very core of the most advanced economies- in information, culture, education, computation, and communications sectors” (Benkler, 2004, p. 278). This surge was due to the “growing availability of free software, distributed computing, and population-scale digital networks” (ibid).
Furthermore, Benkler (2004) emphasized the role of technology and how technology has allowed “various provisioning problems to be structured in forms amenable to decentralized production based on social relations, rather than through markets of hierarchies (…) We are experiencing a new model that combines older economic models marginalized under capitalism. And this new model is enabled by the emergence of digital technologies” (p. 31). This is referring to the fact that effective economic action in the industrial economy did not allow for easy sharing of goods and services. But now, there is a restricting of capital investment in digital networks, particularly user-capitalized computation that is partially reversing this effect (Benkler, 2004).

**Establishing Trust in the Sharing Economy**

The concept of crowd-based capitalism and the removal of corporate mediation within the discourse surrounding sharing transactions has led to what we can consider as the commodification of trust, or the digitization of trust. The rise in crowd-based capitalism is attributed to the improvement in our ability to get people to trust others they don’t know by generating a “digital trust infrastructure” (Sundararajan, 2016, p. 60). Sundararajan proposes sociologist’s James Coleman’s (1990) definition in the context of the sharing economy: trust is “a willingness to commit a collaborative effort before you know how the other person will behave” (ibid). Sharing economy companies digitize trust through their platforms and the ability to establish this trust between users is what has led to their success.

How is trust being so easily established between strangers through these platforms? The trust garnered through the semi-anonymous interactions that take place in the sharing economy stem from the following factors. First, one’s own prior interaction. One’s own familiarity with a
certain process will build overtime and with positive experiences will come higher levels of trust. You are more likely to return to a platform after a positive experience with aspects such as convenience, price, and service. Next, by learning from the experiences of others, we produce our own opinions on the potential of a platform. Rating and review systems used by sharing economy companies create a database for users to reference when deciding whether or not they want to engage with a certain contractor, seller, renter, etc. Online reputation systems have enhanced our ability to trust strangers, based on the opinions and experiences of others. The role of reputation and feedback mechanisms is “to provide future buyers with a window into a seller’s past behavior with previous buyers in anonymous marketplaces” (Tadelis, 2016, p. 7).

Another way trust is built is through brand recognition and certification. For the most part, branding functions in the sharing economy the same way as it does in a traditional economy. Branding can function by differentiating an organization, by showing the authenticity of a product or service and by reinforcing the values of a company (Top Hat, 2017). While there are several platforms that offer ride-sharing services, Uber and Lyft continue to be the most used in the sector. Similarly, Airbnb continues to dominate the accommodation sector. “We are still at a phase of consumption in Western economies where we draw a lot of trust from placing faith in a brand name” (Sundararajan, 2016, p. 62). Branding also plays a role in establishing trust among users. Sharing economy companies stand out against traditional economies in that sometimes millions of different service providers (or contractors) are now able to attach themselves to a large brand, rather than having to create a brand of their own.

Next, social capital can be considered as a type of aggregation of the resources one might have access to on account of a network of relationships. These relationships can include friendships or mutual acquaintances. Having these ties can give you access to a wide range of
resources, whether that be immediately or in the future. “Collectively, these ties and their associated current and potential resources represent your social capital” (Sundararajan, 2016, p. 63). Your social capital is also a representation of your trustworthiness and reliability when engaging in any interactions. Therefore, digitized social capital has become a unique feature of the sharing economy. In addition to the level of social capital, sharing friends with someone ensures further trustworthiness because “you know that the shared friendship is likely to deter bad behavior” (ibid).

Lastly, we can attribute trust to the validation of users by external institutions or entities, digital and otherwise, government and nongovernment. For example, the verification by a platform of your government issued ID will certify that you say who you say you are. Airbnb for example, requires its users to upload an image of government ID such as a driver’s license in order to interact with other users and rent a space, or put up their own space for rent. This demonstrates the important role the government plays in the regulation and the validation of trust among users of the sharing economy. Governments are an authoritative power which have the ability to legitimize a user. Therefore, analyzing a government website and the documents found within a government website is valuable because it will lead us to an understanding of the way in which this powerful actor interprets the sharing economy.

Furthermore, in order to drive with Uber you must own a mobile phone. The fact alone of owning a mobile phone and subscribing to a monthly plan, contributes to some sort of authenticity. You must meet certain requirements in order to obtain that mobile phone and therefore go through an authentication process. Although things such as drivers’ licenses and mobile phones have been available for years, it was only recently that digital technologies have
allowed for the digitization of these forms of external validation and are now part your online profile which is accessible to other users (Sundararajan, 2016, p. 64).

**Uber**

With Uber emerging as the global leader in ride sharing (Dupre, 2016), it has become a prime example of a company which reaps the benefits of the positive connotations associated with the discourse of the sharing economy. Uber, founded in 2009, is an app-based ride sharing company headquartered in San Francisco, California with an estimated value of $50 billion USD (Loizos, 2017). For perspective, Ford Motor Company has an estimated value of $45 billion USD and GM’s market value is approximately $50.8 billion USD (Monica, 2017). The company developed an app which allows riders to request rides via their smartphones to Uber drivers. Uber drivers use their own cars and it is relatively easy to sign up to work as a driver. The service is available in 58 countries and in 405 cities worldwide (Uber, The Uber Story, 2017).

There are appealing aspects for both drivers and riders of Uber. For riders, ubiquity, accessibility and affordability are generally the advantages they enjoy (Salnikov, Lambiotte, Noulas, & Mascolo, 2015). Requesting a ride through the Uber app is designed to be hassle-free and can be used in any city around the world which Uber operates in. Regulations to drive do vary from city to city, however they are all generally similar (Owram, 2016). Uber drivers simply need to be 21 years old, own or lease a vehicle less than 10 years old and pass a minimal background check (Uber, 2017). Drivers do not need safety inspections for their vehicles and can use their existing insurance policies or that of Uber in some cities.

An attractive aspect of Uber for customers is the fact that pricing can often be cheaper compared to traditional taxi company rates (excluding the rate increase or “surge pricing” when
Uber demand is higher than the drivers available). Another factor is the convenience of a nonphysical transaction processing that takes place and allows riders to travel without any cash. Up until recently, tipping was not an option (Hawkins, 2017). However, the lower pricing comes down to a variety of factors. One being the millions of dollars of investments put into the company by venture capitalists and private investors (Morozov, 2016). Another factor is that Uber sends their earnings to offshore accounts which results in tax avoidance for the company (ibid). Furthermore, lower pricing can also be attributed to the fact that drivers/Uber are not currently required to pay for commercial or fleet insurance which comes at a higher cost than typical auto insurance. This sort of insurance is mandatory for drivers in the traditional taxi industry, for obvious reason of safety and security for both drivers and riders. Additionally, Uber drivers are not subject to the same city licensing fees and taxi plate rental costs. These elements cause a lot of conflict between traditional taxi drivers and Uber, with taxi drivers often feeling that it is currently an uneven playing field (CBC News, 2016).

However, what needs to be considered is the fact that although a traditional taxi may usually be more expensive per ride, what exactly are riders losing out on with cheaper pricing? For example, Uber riders are not completely protected in the case of an accident. While Uber states that their insurance is “confidential”, generally drivers will use their existing private insurance policies which would not typically cover any major accidents involving passengers (in the case where a commercial policy would pay out millions of dollars). Ontario has recently become only the second province to approve an insurance plan that covers riders as well as drivers (Reynolds, 2016).
**Uber’s Rating System**

After taking an Uber ride customers are prompted to leave a rating/review for the service they received. This is similar to other sharing economy companies such as Airbnb. Each time a rating/review is left, it gets added towards the drivers overall rating. Uber users are constantly conducting transactions with other users, who are essentially strangers. This puts them at obvious safety risks. Therefore, establishing a good rating contributes to the development of trust.

“Traditional P2P marketplaces involve only monetary risks, while sharing economy platforms include additional risks” (Ert, Fleischer, & Magen, 2016). Furthermore, passengers are assigned a score by their driver as well on the experience the driver had with the passenger. This builds a reputation and credibility for both driver and passenger which in turn facilitates online trust between them. Although Uber promotes itself as a company for which you can work for with “no boss”, the rating system arguably provides a greater source of power than even a boss.

In March 2015, a judge in California ruled on a case in which there was a dispute about whether or not employees of Uber should be entitled to benefits such as minimum wage, even though they are not technically employees. Judge Edward Chan ruled that the rating system is not just a customer feedback tool, but rather a new level of monitoring. “This level of monitoring, where drivers are potentially observable at all times, arguably gives Uber a tremendous amount of control over the ‘manner and means’ of its drivers’ performance” (Chan in Perritt, 2016, p. 30). The judge continued on to quote from Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punishment*, writing “state of conscious and permanent visibility assures the automatic functioning of power” (ibid). Without having to actually hire bosses or supervisors, companies such as Uber collect this information and monitor their “contractors” through the rating system, gaining a panoptic visibility. If the drivers rating goes too low, they will be terminated. Although
these drivers have no traditional boss, it could be argued that they are still answering to some authoritative power which can affect work conditions in an already precarious environment.

Taking into consideration the way in which customers of the service leave a rating at the end of their experience, the corporations control the workers and in the case of Uber, their customers as well. The workers (whether drivers or renters of an accommodation) knowing they are being monitored will ultimately modify their actions. Often, to achieve a high rating, drivers modify their behaviors “to produce a homogenous Uber experience for riders” (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016, p. 3772). This may include something like offering candy or free water bottles for riders, or handing over control of the music being played during their ride.

Although the customers are not working for Uber in any way, providing a rating for each customer is almost like a warning to the customers. As a rider, if you follow a certain standard of behaviour, you will receive a low rating which sometimes may result in longer waits for a ride or getting kicked off of Uber completely. Drivers accept ride requests at their own discretion and if they are given the choice between a higher rated customer and a lower rated one, chances are that the customer with the higher rating will get top priority. One may assume that a company only has control and power over their employees, but Uber exemplifies the way in which a sharing economy company has developed a relationship of power and control over the actions of their customers through rating systems, as well through the data they collect, store, and process.

**A Critical Perspective on the Sharing Economy: Platform Capitalism**

As outlined in the previous section, the sharing economy has found itself with many scholars contributing to definitions, concepts and notions aiming to define and comprehend this relatively new phenomenon. As we grasp a better idea of what exactly the sharing economy is, we can
begin to analyze it from a more critical perspective. Now that we have understood the dominant narrative which tends to only highlight the positive side of the sharing economy, we can take on a more critical standpoint that will help us to understand the impacts, both positive and negative that sharing economy companies are having on cities all around the world. The notion of ‘platform capitalism’ is one we will use to help better grasp these impacts, as well as potentially allow us to theorize what the future of the sharing economy will look like.

Srnicek (2017) provides us with a theoretical framework we will use as a tool to analyze the current practices of the sharing economy since sharing economy companies are in fact platform companies. This framework emphasizes the importance of data and the leveraging of data as a long-term strategy of these companies. The theory of platform capitalism argues that major technology companies are especially now economic actors within a capitalist mode of production. According to Srnicek, at the most general level, platforms are “digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact. Platforms can act as intermediaries which brings together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers and even physical objects (Srnicek, 2017, p. 43). These platforms provide “a series of tools that enable their users to build their own products, services, and marketplaces” (ibid). Srnicek uses Microsoft’s Windows operating system as an example of a platform which allows software developers to create applications for it and sell them to consumers.

In order to understand platform capitalism and ultimately the sharing economy, we must look to the past and understand the context which has brought it to where it is today. First, the response to “the long downturn” in the 1970’s is significant. “In the effort to cut costs, beat our competitors, control workers, reduce turnover time, and gain market share, capitalist reincentivized to continually transform the labour process” (Srnicek, 2017, p. 12). Between the
1950’s and 1960’s, Japan and Germany’s manufacturing productivity grew rapidly which created increased competition for America. “The consequence was that global manufacturing reached a point of overcapacity and overproduction that put downward pressure on the prices of manufactured goods” (p.16). What we then saw was the search to streamline the production process. “A sort of hyper-Taylorism aimed to break the process down into its smallest components and to ensure that as few impediments and downtimes entered into the sequence” (p. 17). This eventually resulted in an attack on the power of labour. In search for cheaper labour, businesses outsourced jobs that lead to deregulation, liberalization and free trade.

Furthermore, the 1990’s brought what is now known as the Dot-com Boom and eventual bust. As Srnicek (2017) notes, the boom is comparable to today’s fascination with the sharing economy. The boom was a result of the commercialization of the internet. There was a lot of financial speculation which eventually fostered large amounts of venture capital. Investors were hanging on to the idea of future profitability which lead to large amounts of capital being invested into the internet. At the height of the bubble in 2000, the level of annual investment in computers was $412.8 billion (p. 22). This boom was able to lay the groundwork for the digital economy of today. However, in the year 2000, the dotcom bubble that had been growing for years finally began to burst.

We can draw parallels between the historical fascination with the potential of the internet and the current bubble around the sharing economy. Airbnb and Uber have become household names within the accommodation and transportation industries. What we must attempt to determine is whether or not the sharing economy lives up to the hype and whether or not it truly serves the publics interests. We can see how the positive narrative of the sharing does not accurately represent its reality, just as the discourse of the Internet once did.
Uber’s operation falls in line with the notion of platform capitalism. The taxi app acts as a platform for drivers and passengers to exchange rides for cash/credit. Rather than having to build a marketplace from the ground up, a platform provides this technology company the basic infrastructure to mediate between different groups. Therefore, as a platform for taxis, Uber draws on traffic data and the activities of drivers and riders which allows them to gain privileged access to this information (Srnicek, 2017, p. 44). Further, this provides a key advantage over traditional business models in terms of data. The platform firstly positions itself between users, as well as the ground upon which their activity occurs (ibid).

This therefore gives the platform access to the data. Srnicek (2017) goes on to argue that “platforms are far more than internet companies or tech companies, since they can operate anywhere, wherever digital interaction takes place” (p. 44). It is for this reason municipalities and governments are finding themselves in need of new regulations and policies. Existing legislature for internet and technology companies cannot be applied to sharing economy/platform companies as they much more than that and operate over varying jurisdictions.

These digital platforms produce and are reliant on “network effects”: the more users who use a platform, the more valuable that platform becomes for everyone else. “This generates a cycle whereby more users beget more users, which leads to platforms having a natural tendency towards monopolization. It also lends platforms a dynamic of ever-increasing access to more activities, and therefore to more data” (Srnicek, 2017, p. 45). This is what has allowed sharing economy companies to become rapidly popular and continuously grow in number of users.

That brings us to the third characteristic described by Srnicek which is that platforms are designed in a way that makes them attractive to its varied users.

The rules of product and service development, as well as marketplace interactions, are set by the platform owner. Uber, despite presenting itself as an empty vessel for market
forces, shapes the appearance of the market. It predicts where the demand for drivers will be and raises surge prices in advance of actual demands, while also creating phantom cabs to give an illusion of greater supply (Srnicek, 2017, p. 47).

The concept of platform capitalism as advanced by Srnicek assists in the development of an understanding of how sharing economy companies function. Moreover, in order to unpack the dominant narratives surrounding the sharing economy, we can use Frank Pasquale’s work *Two Narratives of Platform Capitalism* (2016). In this work, Pasquale focuses on the narratives of platform capitalism and puts forth a counternarrative to several dominant approaches. He explains the way in which neoliberal economic accounts of platform capitalism tend to praise companies such as Uber, Airbnb, as well as other sharing economy companies such as TaskRabbit and Postmates for “promoting labor competition and improving quality, by telling a simple narrative about the incentives created by reducing transactions costs and creating more opportunities for individuals and firms to compete to provide services” (Pasquale, 2016, p. 309). Essentially, this is the same narrative as Gates’ (1995) frictionless capitalism.

He then proceeds to lay out several conventional narratives of platform capitalism. The first being that platforms “promote fairer labour markets by enabling lower-cost entry into these markets by service providers” (Pasquale, 2016, p. 311). Then a counternarrative to this is provided by explaining that platforms may in fact “entrench existing inequalities and promote precarity by reducing the bargaining power of workers and the stability of employment” (ibid).

Next, it is typically believed that platforms “reduce the impact of discrimination by increasing the number of service providers in transportation, housing, and other markets” (p. 311). While there is the idea that companies such as Uber and Airbnb open up the marketplace allowing everyone to connect with no boundaries, we are still seeing cases of discrimination despite this general belief. Discrimination is in fact an innate quality of these platforms.
Consumers and service providers are able to determine their interactions based on ratings and other criteria. With little to no current regulations and varying in every municipality or region, many of these sharing economy companies are not held accountable for any discriminatory behavior of their contractors, users, etc. Any anti-discrimination laws that may exist in a municipality for accommodation and transportation providers, do not cover the scope of online markets. In reality, what is being seen with platforms are increasing cases of discrimination. By “identifying customers with picture based profiles which reveal their race or racially-identified names. Ranking and rating systems can also reinforce bias” (ibid).

Notably, Airbnb has come under fire with accusations of discrimination against African American users (Edelman & al, 2017). Many of the sharing economy platforms allow for users to create profiles and allow for screening of other members before accepting or offering any goods or services. This applies to Airbnb as well which requires members who wish to rent property or put their property up for rent to create a profile for themselves including a picture.

Through a field experiment, Edelman, Luca and Svirsky (2017) demonstrate this and explore the cases of discrimination that may appear within the sharing economy. They created identical guest accounts that differed only by name. By looking at roughly 6,400 Airbnb listings in several different cities, the researchers found that “applications from guests with distinctively African American names are 16 percent less likely to be accepted relative to identical guests with distinctively white names” (p. 1). Their results indicated that Airbnb’s current design in fact facilitates discrimination among users, rather than the dominant belief that these companies are reducing the impact of discrimination. They note that “if a platform aspires to provide a discrimination-free environment, its rules must be designed accordingly” (p. 18). This study addresses Airbnb specifically, however it is plausible to claim that other sharing economy
companies with a similar profile set up, design and procedures, will also provide a ground for discrimination. While Edelman & al. do offer recommendations for creating a discrimination-free marketplace, they also note however, that any changes by Airbnb would likely be the result of ethical considerations or public pressure rather than law. “The legal system grants considerable protection to online marketplaces, Airbnb is unlikely to be held liable for allowing discrimination on its platform. Within the United States, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination in hotels (and other public accommodations) based on race, color, religion, or national origin. But these laws appear to be a poor fit for the informal sharing economy, where private citizens rent out a room in their home” (ibid).

A similar study examined racial and gender discrimination in transportation network companies in the United States. Sharing economy transportation companies were presented as a possibly less discriminatory option than traditional transportation options. However, Ge & al. (2016) reveal that for black Uber riders in Seattle, wait times were 29 to 35 percent longer. In Boston, there were frequent cancellations against passengers when they used African American-sounding names. But in all cities, the cancelation rate for African American names was more than twice as frequent compared to white sounding names. The study also found that drivers took female passengers for longer, more expensive, rides in Boston. The authors note that that removing names from trip booking “may alleviate the immediate problem but could introduce other pathways for unequal treatment of passengers” (Ge, Knittel, MacKenzie, & Zoepf, 2016).

Pasquale (2017) goes on further to also note the general belief is that “regulators of platforms are likely to reflect the biases and interests of incumbent providers (like taxis and hotels) thanks to incumbents’ political ties” (p. 311). However, as noted “large platforms now
command so many resources that their own lobbying efforts can easily swamp those of fragmented and uncoordinated incumbents” (ibid).

In the United States alone, Uber spent $1.36 USD million on federal lobbying efforts in 2016 (Zanona, 2017). The company has also made lobbying efforts in many Canadian cities such as Toronto and Ottawa with the hopes of convincing city councillors to rewrite existing regulations with the company in mind (Hui, 2015). With cities attempting to understand and often struggling to figure out how they will regulate Uber, the company has put great focus on regulatory hurdles such as background checks for drivers, whether commercial licenses should be required for its UberX drivers or whether drivers should be classified as employees (Kokalitcheva, 2015) as these are the issues which the company is most often faced with city to city. The analysis of the city of Toronto’s discourse will allow us to see how cities are dealing with these issues.

Another widely popular belief is that platforms “promote economic growth by drawing the un- and underemployed into the labor market” (Pasquale, 2017, p. 311). Unfortunately, this is not always the case. The counternarrative that Pasquale offers is that platforms in fact “undermine growth by reducing wages as workers scramble for gigs by offering to complete them for lower wages than their competitors” (ibid). This is closely tied to the ideas and beliefs that “platforms promote flexibility by breaking down jobs into tasks, enabling workers to piece together work at their own pace” (ibid). However, in reality, the case tends to be that these companies are just offering jobs which are “low-pay gigs and piecework that force

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1 Uber offers a selection of ride services varying in rider capacity and cost. UberX is the generally recognized and available service, typically sedans and seating up to 4 passengers. Other services include UberXL, usually SUVs and minivans, seating up to 6 people; UberSelect, a luxury service offering rides in vehicle brand such as BMW, Mercedes, Audi; UberPool, rides shared with other customers, splitting the cost of the fair (RideSharingDriver, 2016). The service referred to throughout this MRP is UberX, however will be referred to simply as Uber.
workers to be “ready for duty” constantly in case they miss an opportunity to work (Hill, 2016). With platforms creating this sort of piecework employment and classifying workers simply as contractors, there then becomes a problem in terms of protection and rights.

In 2016, Uber drivers were beginning to reject potential trips because the rides would not turn a profit (Lazzaro, 2016). Around that time, Uber had lowered its prices which in turn affected the profit drivers were making. Drivers were reporting “hourly earnings in the realm of $2.89 and $3.22, and, after vehicle fees are taken for those who must pay Uber for their cars, $0” (ibid).

Lastly, we come to the data in all of this. Being driven by data, the conventional narrative is that “using data-driven profiles of users, platforms can pre-emptively channel them to the workers they are most compatible with” (Pasquale, 2017, p. 311). However, in actuality, “users may experience loss of agency when serendipitous or unpredictable options are effectively hidden or obscured” (p. 311). Sharing economy companies are at an advantage with the amount of data they acquire from each user/customer. The more the company knows about a person, the more they are able to meet their needs and monetize their attention (Calo & Rosenblat, 2017).

Worker Rights and Precarious Employment

As Pasquale (2017) helped to emphasize, the dominant narrative of the sharing economy is that these platforms promote economic growth and provide opportunity for the unemployed. However, a big issue that comes into question with the sharing economy is the nature of the work being created. For example, there are currently clear and concise policies regarding the termination of an Uber contractor. As an Uber driver, you are given little to no warning about your deactivation/firing. Uber drivers are also considered as contractors, not employees of Uber.
Typically, a driver will have their account deactivated for low ratings that have been provided by customers/riders. However, several drivers have reported on the different and less common ways termination may occur. They include speaking out against Uber on social media and/or promoting a competitor’s service (such as the ride sharing platform Lyft) (Campbell, 2015).

With policies varying municipally and provincially, this leaves little available for drivers to rely on, drivers are left unequipped to defend themselves in a case of deactivation which ultimately without any notice, leaves them unemployed. The company which relies solely on non-unionized, non-contracted employees is therefore in a position of great power over their workers.

Uber has famously lobbied its drivers to oppose unionization (Bensinger, 2017). The company has also fought against drivers in cities which have attempted to unionize. Most notably in Seattle, Washington Uber drivers have been fighting for the right to unionize, collectively bargain and be recognized as employees, rather than simply contractors. In 2015, the city of Seattle passed an ordinance allowing drivers to unionize. Uber fought back, however ultimately lost at their attempt to overturn the ordinance. Morris (2017) notes Uber has been previously hard-nosed in dealing with ordinances threaten to burden its operations. Uber stopped their operations in Austin, Texas after a rule demanding background checks on drivers went into effect. This raises the question of whether or not the company will see this as a big enough threat to stop operations in Seattle as well.

Flexible and precarious employment is now becoming more common than ever. “Precarious work has grown enormously in Canada and now accounts for close to half of the active labour force. Part-time workers now are 19% of the workforce. This has grown from 13% in 1980, an increase of 1.3 million workers” (McDonell, 2013). Companies are turning away
from hiring full time and/or permanent employees, and opting for part time/non contracted workers.

Standing (2011) refers to this new working class as the precariats. The term ‘precariat’ – a combination of ‘precarious’ and ‘proletariat’, was first used by French sociologists to describe temporary and seasonal workers. Globalisation made labour relations more flexible which resulted in a higher number of people finding themselves in insecure forms of labour (Standing, 2011, p. 5). Due to globalisation there had been a “fragmentation of national class structures” which resulted in the precariat, a distinctive socio-economic group. The precariat is not part of the normal working class, which can be classified as having a long-term, stable job, with potential for unionization and collective agreements (p. 6).

Standing (2011) also characterizes seven forms of labour-related security which the precariat worker lacks. We can consider sharing economy “contractors”, Uber drivers notably, as lacking these forms of labour security; labour market security: adequate income-earning opportunities, employment security; protection against arbitrary termination, job security; the ability and opportunity to retain employment, work security: protection against accidents and illness at work, including safety and health regulations and limits on working time, skill reproduction security; the opportunity to gain skills through apprenticeships or employee training, income security; assurance of an adequate and stable income, representation security: possessing a collective voice in the labour market, through trade unions, the right to strike (p. 10). Though the dominant narrative is that platforms are generating employment opportunities, we must examine the types of employment being generated, as well as the conditions which the workers will be facing. There might be an immediate economic growth in the labour market but whether or not it is sustainable for the workers is another issue.
If we look at the employment generated through the sharing economy by companies such as Uber, it is obvious that their “employees” lack all the seven forms of labour-related security as outlined by Standing (2011). While this is not unique to Uber, the company provides a perfect example of this. An Uber driver’s income is not guaranteed, nor is there a minimum wage they will make. This leaves drivers sometimes making under the national minimum wage (Smith, 2016). As previously noted, termination can occur at any time with hardly any warning. This ties into job security which should in theory allow drivers the opportunity to retain employment, as well give them the prospects of upward mobility and gaining more income. Workplace security has become a central concern for many companies that fall under the label of sharing economy. With no health and safety regulations in place, there is no protection against possible accidents. Uber drivers must only use cars that are no older than 10 years, but other than that there are no safety regulations which is problematic for obvious reasons. Not only for the worker/driver, but for the passengers that are being driven around in these cars. Moreover, Uber employees are not given any skill reproduction or income security as described by Standing. And lastly, in terms of representation, drivers are certainly not given the opportunity nor encouraged to join together in any collective action. Trade unions and the right to strike do not exist.

With the growing literature on the sharing economy, it is vital to garner an extensive understanding of the issues at hand. The purpose of this review was to help build an understanding of both the dominant and critical perspectives of the sharing economy phenomenon. The literature demonstrated that critical thinkers are beginning to unravel the true nature of this economic model. As demonstrated, typical mainstream descriptions of the sharing economy tend to glorify the phenomenon and solely perpetuate a narrative of sharing. Scholars such as Sundararajan present the sharing economy as crowd-based capitalism, rather than
traditional capitalism. He offers a celebratory narrative and suggests the replacement of the corporation with crowds within sharing transactions. However, critics such as Pasquale and Srnicek have demonstrated that this relatively new economic model presents itself with some flaws and challenges. Issues of labour, precarious work and discrimination are all important societal aspects that must to be accounted for if companies such as Uber and Airbnb are going to continue to operate in cities around the world.
III. **Methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis**

Keeping the research questions in mind: to what extent does the municipal government of Toronto provide a favourable representation of the sharing economy, one that aligns closely with the dominant corporate narrative, the methodology used in this paper draws primarily from Huckin’s approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in order to answer the questions posed. CDA comes from a ‘critical theory of language which sees the use of language as a form of social practice’ (Janks, 1997, p. 329). It is a framework used to explain, describe, and interpret the relationships between language and society (Rogers, 2004). CDA incorporates a close examination of elements such as framing, foregrounding, omission, and presupposition.

The content analyzed for this project will be the City of Toronto’s Sharing Economy webpage found under the Policy, Research, Public Consultation and Events section of their website. The choice of this page came down to the fact that this was the only page featured on The City of Toronto’s website that explicitly addressed the sharing economy. The only other reference to these sorts of sharing companies is the bylaws that are posted on the city’s website. However, the webpage chosen in this analysis was the only place where the city had laid out some sort of explanation for the general public. The general public may not always be inclined to read a city by-law, or have the technical knowledge to understand a by-law in depth, therefore a website like the one featured would likely be their main source of information to learn about this phenomenon.

The content on the webpage is from a forum on the sharing economy that the city held in October 2015. This includes the agenda of the forum, presentations, and a summary of the day. Sharing economy companies and their users are primarily subject to policies and regulations (i.e. regarding short term rental policy and ride sharing/transportation) set forth by municipal
governments, rather than at the federal or provincial levels. For this reason, Canada’s largest municipality was chosen for this analysis. As sharing companies continue to expand, it becomes essential for municipalities to examine existing regulations and bylaws in order to assure consumer and worker protection. Through a CDA of the website contents, the aim is to assess the discourse used by the City of Toronto when describing the sharing economy to the general public in order to discover whether the city aligns with mainstream accounts of the sharing economy, or whether a critical perspective is offered.

The city of Toronto was chosen for its dominance in the Canadian economic, political and cultural landscape. It is Canada’s most populous city and what is going on in Toronto can be seen as representative of bigger and more pervasive discourses happening in cities all over Canada. While other large cities in Canada, such as Vancouver, are currently scrambling to figure out how, if at all, to regulate sharing economy companies, Toronto is an example of a large city doing so and may be able to mold policies for other cities to follow. CDA as a methodological approach allows for an analysis of how the language used throughout the City of Toronto’s website helps to construct the sharing economy narrative and perpetuate certain perspectives over others.

Methodologically, CDA is beneficial because of the principle goals of the method. A key aspect of CDA is that it aims to understand and expose the relations of power that exist within texts/discourse. CDA makes “the voice of the marginalized legitimate and heard and to take the voice of those in power into question to reveal hidden agendas and motives that serve self-interests, maintain superiority, and ensure others’ subjugation.” (Henry & Tator in Bilal et. al., 2012, p.3). The relationship of power considered below is that of the precarious worker/labourer and sharing companies. Sharing companies and the government instill the rules and regulations
that users and labourers must abide by, therefore putting them in a position of power. This method allows for an examination of the website’s discourse which leads to a discovery of whether or not the discourse is emblematic of certain ideas and ideals, while neglecting others. It considers ways in which discourse structures can legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society (van Dijk, 1993).

Huckin’s (1997) version of CDA suggests the researcher reads the texts in two stages. Firstly, in an uncritical manner as a casual, non-specialist observer. A casual reader of this website may be any member of the public or resident of the city. Understanding how they grasp the information on the website reinforces the importance of a critical reading of the texts in order to expose what they may or may not identify. The next task, then, is to step back and look at the text from a more critical perspective (Huckin, 1997). At this stage, Huckin suggests looking at the text from three levels: the text as a whole, sentence-by-sentence and word-by-word. The differing levels involve reading the text and “raising questions about it, imagining how it could have been constructed differently, mentally comparing it to related texts” (Huckin, 1997, p. 5). Huckin explains that looking at the texts from this level “allows the analyst to focus on those features that seem to have the potential of misleading the unwary reader” (ibid).

Looking at text as a whole, Huckin states that the CDA analyst should determine the genre of the text, which is usually immediately recognizable (p. 6). The text will “manifest a characteristic set of formal features serving a characteristic purpose” (ibid). Huckin further explains that this “genre-orientation often allows the analyst to see why certain kinds of statements appear in the text and how they might serve the purposes of the text-producer, as encoded in that genre” (ibid). Moreover, how the text conforms to the genre can help not only understand the structure of the text, but also the importance of what is being said and how it
could be serving a purpose for its author(s). For example, a municipal government website that is easily accessible to the public will have a different format and register than an official government document that may only be circulated among government officials or certain parties of interest. The City of Toronto’s sharing economy webpage which is this project’s case study is intended for dissemination to the public.

Framing occurs in the text as a whole and is a key aspect of text production and interpretation. Huckin refers to framing as the way “the content of a text is presented, what sort of perspective (angle, slant) the writer is taking (…) to be coherent, a text cannot simply be a collection of details; rather, it must try to pull these details together into some sort of unified whole” (p. 7). This analysis will take into consideration the way the website frames and puts into perspective both sharing economy transactions as well as the relationship between capital and laborer, as well as capital and consumer.

Subsequently foregrounding and backgrounding, which are closely related to the framing of a text, must be considered. Foregrounding in the documents analyzed will lead to an understanding of which ideas are being emphasized and which are not (backgrounding). Analyzing what is not being foregrounded is key to a more critical analysis, as a typical uncritical reader will likely not recognize what information or ideas are being backgrounded in a text. For instance, what the city of Toronto chooses to foreground throughout their website will indicate the aspects they believe to be of most importance for the public to recognize and understand. At this level of the analysis it is important to consider questions such as whether or not there will be any critical issues raised, such as workers’ rights, or will the discourse be predominantly celebratory of the new sharing companies in the city?
Huckin explains that the ultimate form of backgrounding in a text is omission (p. 8), which is essentially leaving out certain concepts completely out of a text. Similar to foregrounding, “if the writer does not mention something, it often does not even enter the reader’s mind and thus is not subjected to his or her scrutiny. It is difficult to raise questions about something that is not even there” (p. 8).

The last element examined within the text as a whole is presupposition. The use of presuppositions allows the writer of a text to present certain ideas as the dominant discourse and remove the possibility of any other alternative. This is often present in public discourse and other forms of persuasive rhetoric (p. 9). “Presuppositions are notoriously manipulative because they are difficult to challenge: Many readers are reluctant to question statements that the author appears to be taking for granted” (ibid). As Pasquale explains, there are many popular narratives and presuppositions of platforms such as they promote fairer labor markets (Pasquale, 2016, p. 311). This narrative as well as others will be examined within the text found on the website.

At this point the analysis moves to the sentence-by-sentence level. At this level of analysis, many features are similar to those analyzed in the text as a whole. The foregrounding and backgrounding that takes place at the sentence level looks at the way in which the writer has topicalized a sentence and created a certain perspective in a text. “Often the topic of one sentence continues as the topic of the next, reinforcing its importance in the text” (Huckin, 1997, p.9). Identifying phrases that may refer to the sharing economy as “new”, “innovative” or “alternative” will reveal foregrounding of dominant sharing narratives. On the other spectrum of foregrounding is backgrounding of ideas. As mentioned, omissions are the ultimate form of backgrounding.
Deletion or omission of agents occur at the sentence level and is another form of possible manipulation. A non-critical reader would typically not notice these omissions. Notably, we often see an omission of the corporation as an agent that exists in sharing economy companies. Identifying omissions such as these leads to a better understanding of the implications of key facts being left out of public discourse.

Next, Huckin (1997) suggests that sentence level presuppositions are common especially in persuasive rhetoric (p. 9). They are manipulative because they are difficult to challenge and ultimately “many readers are reluctant to question statements that the author appears to be taking for granted” (ibid).

Insinuations are another powerful textual element that will be identified throughout the city’s webpage. Insinuation will be comments which are suggestive and also difficult for readers to challenge because they “typically have double meanings, and if challenged, the writer can claim innocence, pretending to have only one of these two meanings in mind” (ibid).

The final level of analysis focuses on words and phrases. Connotations are words that carry special meanings which can be either positive or negative. For example, the word “new” when used to describe the sharing economy will carry positive connotations and elude to the idea that new is better which glorifies and creates a false idea surrounding sharing companies. Connotations derive from the frequent use of the word (p.10). Additionally, connotations can be “conveyed through the use of metaphor or other figures of speech” (ibid).

The register of the text is the formality or informality which the writer uses. Using a technical register throughout the whole webpage or in certain sections may mislead a reader to believe the source of information is more reliable than if a less formal register was used. And lastly, modality refers to the tone of statements as regards their degree of certitude and authority.
By assessing the elements of CDA as outlined by Huckin throughout the website, I am able to address my key research question: To what extent does the municipal government of Toronto provide a favourable representation of the sharing economy, one that aligns closely with the dominant corporate narrative? Special attention is paid to the elements of foregrounding/backgrounding, omission and presuppositions at all levels of the analysis because these elements are most significant in terms of their ability to perpetuate a certain narrative and carry the ideals of the text’s author(s).

Using these aforementioned elements, an analysis is done on The City of Toronto’s website dedicated to the dissemination of information regarding the sharing economy to the public. The website contains an agenda of The Sharing Economy Forum, which includes the key points of the forum and presentations provided by: The Mowat Centre, MaRs Solutions Lab and one by the Ontario Chamber of Commerce. Each of these presentations is available under separate headings on the site. The website also includes several links to other reports for further information on the sharing economy. These links were not addressed as they were not the main features of the city’s website and it would have not been plausible with the time and length constraints of this project. Each report linked to the main website includes several pages of information from several sources which ultimately include links to other pages. From an analysis standpoint it made most sense to limit the analysis to the main City of Toronto website, otherwise the question of whether or not to click the links on the following pages would arise. At what point then would one stop following the links? The one webpage featuring the several presentations provided ample material for analysis.

Following Huckin, the steps by which the City of Toronto’s Sharing Economy website was analyzed are as follows. Starting with a glance at the website/text as a whole, the
The webpage is extensive and includes six headings which can be expanded. Once expanded with the “expand all” feature, there are approximately 23 pages of material. This includes descriptive text, as well as images and graphs with informational text. The way the website is organized and categorized will help to determine the genre of the site. An examination of framing will then take place by asking what sort of perspective is being taken? For example, is the sharing economy as a whole framed as solely a positive phenomenon for the city or one that may have some negative drawbacks? Does the website provide alternative definitions or solely conform to a traditional definition which allows for a particular framing?

Next, a more close-up level of analysis is done by looking particularly at the phrases and words as disseminated throughout the presentations featured on the webpage. With a close analysis of each individual presentation, the contents are considered at the phrase and word levels. Elements such as foregrounding and backgrounding are examined with the primary intent of revealing any biases in the discourse, as well as determine whether or not a counternarrative is ever presented. Connotations are an especially powerful element that will be noted. By identifying whether words carry positive/celebratory or negative/critical connotations, I am able to determine the stance being taken and help to answer the questions being posed about the nature of the discourse on The City of Toronto’s website.

As of November 25th 2017, the City of Toronto has removed the webpage analyzed from their website. According to Senior Policy and Research Officer at City of Toronto, the city is currently in midst of a web migration (Shamshiri, 2018). Some content has not been moved to the new site and this may be something still to come. The analysis was performed prior to this date.
IV. Analysis

The City of Toronto’s Policy, Research, Public Consultation and Events: The Sharing Economy webpage has been designed to help educate the public on the sharing economy and the government’s role within it, based on the format and contents of the page. The webpage provides definitions of key terms within the sharing economy and issues we are being faced with at this time.

Contents of the Sharing Economy Webpage

The webpage begins with a brief introduction of the sharing economy, as well as an overview of the forum that the City of Toronto held about the topic. The main focus of this analysis is the presentations that were made at the sharing economy forum held in Toronto in October 2015, which are now featured on the page as the main source of information. Presentations by the following groups/individuals are featured on the webpage: The Mowat Centre, “an independent public policy think tank located at the School of Public Policy & Governance at the University of Toronto and Ontario’s non-partisan, evidence-based voice on public policy” (Mowat Centre, 2015); MaRs Solutions Lab, a “public and social innovation lab that helps to solve complex social and economic challenges” (MaRS Solutions Lab, 2015); Ontario Chamber of Commerce, “independent, non-partisan voice of Ontario business (…) steering public policy conversations provincially and within local communities” (Ontario Chamber of Commerce, 2015).

Critical Discourse Analysis

Now that the main features and contents of the webpage are identified, the first step of Huckin’s (1997) model of CDA involves reading the text as a whole in an uncritical manner,
from the eyes of a casual observer. As the webpage is intended for the general public, the contents are generally accessible for a non-specialist reader. The page provides simple definitions for readers to understand and develop a general understanding about the sharing economy. There are some graphs and images included throughout the page which make some of the information more comprehensible.

Readers who choose to explore the webpage more in depth are able to expand sections of the page to reveal the presentations which contain further information about the sharing economy and include more information and concerns in terms of social impact and policy issues associated with the sharing economy. Depending on which presentation the reader is looking at, a more technical register will start to appear. Register refers to the degree of formality and at this point, we begin to see more technical and specialized terms and phrases that an unspecialized reader may not completely understand, such as: a “need to step back and establish a principles-based strategic operating framework” (City of Toronto, 2015). All the presentation featured on the webpage will be considered throughout the forthcoming analysis.

**The Text as a Whole**

**Genre**

At this point the critical portion of the analysis takes place. Firstly, the genre of the webpage must be identified. The genre of this webpage, and the texts/reports/presentations found within it, are public governmental documents. This website is intended for the public to garner knowledge and understanding of the sharing economy. As well as to make public the forum which the city held on this topic. These are not official government documents intended exclusively for government officials or specific interest groups, but rather these sorts of documents provide the public an opportunity to form their own opinions regarding the sharing
economy. The webpage begins by explaining that the sharing economy “has become a subject of much debate as policy makers try to identify the issues and understand potential impacts on people, neighbourhoods, the economy, and traditional industries” (City of Toronto, 2017). Thus, this indicates the parties of interest the website may be aiming the content towards as well as the focus of the information included throughout the page.

Therefore, the tone of the text as a whole is of importance because it will ultimately act as an aid in the formation of the publics views on the topic. Realizing the genre of the text allows for an understanding of why certain kinds of statements appear in the text and how they might serve the purposes of the text’s author. (Huckin, 1997). This ultimately helps later in the analysis to better identify and understand the omissions and the reasons why these omissions were made.

**Framing**

The webpage begins immediately with defining the sharing economy as such: “the sharing economy consists of marketplaces and platforms that allow individuals and organizations to buy and sell goods and services directly from one another, and share or lend goods or assets on a short-term or time-share basis.” (City of Toronto, 2015). The same definition is also featured once more at the beginning of The Mowat Center presentation summary. It states that the sharing economy is: “marketplaces/platforms that allow people to: buy goods and services directly from one another, instead of from traditional businesses (…) share the same assets on a rental/time-share basis, rather than buying” (Mowat Centre, 2015). By providing a definition from the get-go, the website frames the sharing economy with the text producers’ desired perspective. The definition provided can be unpacked in several ways. It is used to frame the sharing economy within the dominant narrative which generally “hints at the shift away from
faceless, impersonal 20th-century capitalism and toward exchange that is somehow more connected, more embedded in community, more reflective of a shared purpose” (Sundararajan, 2016, p.35). The definition provided on the webpage aligns with this by indicating goods and services are bought directly from individuals, rather than traditional businesses. This definition is pivotal because it frames all that follows. The lay reader of the website will have this definition in mind every time they encounter or the site refers to the sharing economy in the future. Furthermore, if a reader was to briefly glance at the page without reading each section in-depth, they will undoubtedly at least encounter the definition provided and thus be influenced by its framing of the issue at hand.

By explaining that one can “buy goods and services directly from one another” and “share the same assets on a rental/time-share basis, rather than buying”, there is an emphasis on the fact that assets are shared rather than bought. There is also contained within this definition a presupposition that there are no traditional businesses or business models involved by stating that one will share with others “instead of from traditional businesses”. This definition reinforces the dominant discourses which allude to a community exchange of assets/services, rather than a capitalist one.

However, as Srnicek (2017) explains, sharing companies are currently utilizing a hyper-outsourced capital model where “workers are outsourced, fixed capital is outsourced, and training is outsourced (…) all that remains is a bare extractive minimum-control over the platform that enables a monopoly rent to be gained” (p. 76). Precarious or piece-work labour results in a reduction of costs for the company and therefore a higher capital/profit. The implication of omitting the fact that there is indeed a ‘traditional’ business involved in your transaction is that the reader of the text is being misinformed on the subject which does not allow
for a critical approach to using and potentially working for sharing economy platforms and services. Ultimately, the webpage begins immediately by framing the sharing economy in a positive light and reinforcing a glorified dominant narrative. By reinforcing the idea of transactions purely occurring between individuals, the narrative alludes to the idea that this is a new economy, different from a traditional capitalist one. Furthermore, important worker and consumer issues are therefore put on the backburner and/or completely omitted.

**Sentence-by-Sentence & Word Level**

As Huckin (1997) suggests, the analysis should move towards the sentence-by-sentence level, as well as the word-by-word level. The following analysis will separately break down each presentation featured on the city’s webpage and consider the elements of importance as discussed in the methodology chapter throughout the sentence and word levels of the content of each presentation.

**What is the Sharing Economy: Mowat Centre Presentation**

The first presentation featured was made by Sunil Johal, Policy Director at The Mowat Centre. It is a PowerPoint presentation where the text is featured in bullet points and thus not a complete representation of what was said by Johal during the actual forum. The presentation begins with listing the research The Mowat Center does involving the sharing economy. This includes “City of Ottawa: Taxi Review”, “OECD: Tourism and the Sharing Economy” and “Metrolinx: GTA Transportation Review”. It then proceeds, as mentioned above, to define the sharing economy.

After providing a general definition, the presentation proceeds with a section entitled *Is This Really New*. What can be found in this section is an alignment with the dominant
mainstream discourse of the sharing economy, introducing it as a safer and better alternative to traditional businesses:

“Is This Really New: Technology allows it to be relatively frictionless and safe, making it more appealing. Easy to expand rapidly – no need for physical infrastructure to enter new city. Regulatory barriers are central to their trajectory” (Mowat Centre, 2015).

The use of the terms “frictionless and safe” presupposes that technology, in particular communication technologies, provide a friction-free Internet economy and completely facilitates all of our transactions online. This idea has been disseminated historically since Internet access became readily available. We are able to draw parallels between the rhetoric used since the late 1990’s and the sharing economy discourse of today. Gates (1995) explains that “the information highway will extend the electronic marketplace and make it the ultimate go-between, the universal middleman. Often the only humans involved in a transaction will be the actual buyer and seller” (p. 158). The same omission and deletion of agents, specifically the corporate middle man, in Gate’s discourse occurs throughout text of the city’s webpage and in mainstream discourse of the sharing economy.

The following section of the presentation is entitled Speed & Scale of Growth and features some statistics about some sharing companies.

“Airbnb, established 2008, valued at approx. $25B. Official provider for Rio games. Uber, established 2009, valued at over $50B – more than General Motors. Etsy held an IPO in April, current market cap around $1.5B” (Mowat Centre, 2015).

Although these statistics indicate the large value and capital of sharing companies, what this section fails to mention and clearly omits, is the rate at which these companies are in fact losing money. Looking at Uber as a specific example, in the first half of 2016 the company lost $1.27 billion USD, making it the fastest money losing technology company ever (Nunez, 2016). A large percentage of their costs are legal fees and lobbying efforts. The presentation featured on
the city’s website omits facts such as this one, leaving it completely out of the text and out of the mind of readers. For a company like this which takes in so much money and investments, one must ask why and how do they continue to lose so much? It exploits workers, not providing them with proper job security and wages, yet is still unable to make a profit. There must be something innately not functioning with the structure of the company and how it operates if it continues to lose money. This can be potentially drawn back to the failure for the overall sharing economy model. Even with the change in the labour process, the company has failed to create a sustainable business model. However, if the reader of a text is not presented with these facts, they will be unable to critique or raise questions such as these about such companies.

In the following sections of the webpage there are a few headings which include information that begins to offer somewhat of a more critical perspective. The Why this matters from a public policy perspective heading states that the sharing economy is: “Creating an unfair gap between rules faced by traditional operators and their competitors” and it is currently “incompatible with command and control regulatory models” (Mowat Centre, 2015). While this is accurate and more critical in nature, we still see a failure to more deeply recognize the blind spots of the dominant narrative of the sharing economy. The unfair gap being referred to affects employees of traditional operators such as taxi drivers in the case of ride sharing, or owners of bed and breakfasts’/ hotels in the case of short-term accommodation rentals.

A current major downfall of the sharing economy is the avoidance of regulatory obligations that traditional businesses must abide by. There is an omission of this fact within the texts analyzed, however it is a key issue that needs to be considered in city policy making. Most commonly taxi companies are arguing that “Uber gained an unfair competitive advantage over
traditional taxi dispatch services and license holders by avoiding the costs and burdens of complying with extensive regulations” (Jonas, 2016, p. 222).

Furthermore, with the absence of suitable regulations, sharing companies are able to avoid labour law compliance largely due to their classification of employees. Many sharing companies “end up classifying themselves as intermediary platforms and their workers as independent contractors, as opposed to classifying themselves as employers and their workers as employees” (Becker & Rajwani, 2016, p. 5). The alarming result of all of this is that all responsibilities and risks of the workplace are now shifted on to workers in an already unstable precarious work environment. Sharing companies such as Uber and Airbnb have thus omitted themselves from “complying with their region’s broad range of employment, labour and work regulations; deducting and remitting relevant contributions, premiums, and taxes; and providing mandatory workplace training” (ibid). Many sharing companies have argued that instilling labour regulations will prevent innovation and insist workers are not their employees. Rather, they solely offer an online platform for workers and consumers to find each other (Leberstein & Smith, 2015).

Platforms also reduce barriers of entry to the industry, therefore leaving professionals (i.e. professional drivers or bed & breakfast accommodations) in competition with students or people seeking supplementary income. This leads to greater pressure on pay and working conditions (Drahokoupil & Fabo, 2016). This dynamic draws right back to the classification of employees and avoidance of regulations by sharing economy companies. Furthermore, the concept of workers using sharing platforms as a means of earning “a little extra money” is what has allowed companies to exempt themselves from labour regulations. Slee (2016) explains that what we are seeing is the same thing that occurred when women were allowed to start working in
1960’s. “They were not seen as “real” jobs that demanded a living wage, and so did not need to be treated the same, or paid as much” (Slee, 2016, p. 11).

The next section in the presentation is entitled Opportunities. It offers a promising and positive view of the sharing economy.

“New models can broaden economic opportunity & encourage innovation; improved service delivery and more efficient use of assets; data available through sharing economy platforms to better understand issues such as access and equity” (Mowat Centre, 2015).

The concept of innovation within this context connotes that the sharing economy, as a “new model” will be better than the old model. Innovation can be considered as heavily influencing competitiveness, and a failure to innovate generally decreases competitiveness (Herrera, 2015). Companies which are more innovative are considered to have a competitive advantage. But what is the innovation of the sharing economy? The excerpt in the Mowat Centre presentation considers improved service delivery and more efficient use of assets as the innovation of sharing companies. However, “participants in the sharing economy employ a discourse of trendiness, technological sophistication, progress and innovation” (Frenken & Schor, 2017, p. 4). The sharing economy is a phenomenon which developed from the internet and internet communication technologies, is accompanied by the same discourse the internet once had and arguably continues to have today.

The following heading titled Challenges, establishes the difficulties of the sharing economy, as according to The Mowat Centre. “Incompatible with command and control regulatory models, political and cultural context for governments is a hurdle, diversity among sharing economy platforms means one size won’t fit all and will require more flexible approaches” (Mowat Centre, 2015). We must ask why these are the problems that have been
identified. Who are the agents/groups/institutions that are involved in stating the problem and implementing policy? The policy makers, members of municipal government and perhaps corporate lobbying interests are those making the decisions which will consequently be implemented for the public to follow. Those who have contributed to the creation of this webpage and the presentation’s features are the agents of power in creating the regulations which will essentially regulate the sharing economy.

There is emphasis on the fact that new regulations need to be developed and implemented due to the fact that many of the existing policies do not apply to the new sharing economy companies which make regulating them a challenge. The omission of the fact that not only are these companies incompatible with currently regulatory models, but that they also continue to function freely outside of those models. There is a constant neglect for employment legislation, labour market regulations, vital tax structures, insurance coverage, city planning standards, and social benefits (Becker & Rajwani, 2016, p. 10), leaving both workers and consumers at risk.

What is not unique to this section alone, is the omission of any mention of the significance of labour issues and/or workers’ rights. That aspect has been completely left out of the discourse of the sharing economy by the City of Toronto, which ultimately allows for key issues to skip the mind of readers. These omissions are reflective of the dominant corporate narrative. We are presented with the positive friction-free version of the sharing economy, and important issues of labour, discrimination, etc. are left out of the readers’ imagination.
The MaRS presentation focuses on designing a regulatory framework for a “smarter government”. This section includes points on the value of a design perspective as well has how to create effective regulation for the sharing economy.

“Public Design for Smarter Government: The Sharing Economy is posing challenging questions to governments on how best to regulate this. Effective regulation: Deals with changing environment, addresses public policy concerns, reduces burden of compliance”

The Value of a Design Perspective

Step 1: Understand challenges from user perspective - institutional perspective; user perspective; system perspective
Step 2: Design solutions from "empty box approach" - convene different stakeholders, define public value, then design possible ways to create it
Step 3: Test and gather evidence of what works - iterative policy making: run time-limited policy experiments and see what works” (MaRS, 2015)

This part of the presentation summary found within the sharing economy webpage provides a relatively straightforward informational description of why design solutions are needed. While it is not entirely embedded with the mainstream sharing economy discourse, the information does foreground the aspects MaRS believes need to be addressed, while backgrounding and completely omitting others.

These points lead to and are used to set up case studies. To support their arguments for regulatory design, the MaRS presentation summary features graphics with text (See Appendix) which outline the “journeys” of a traditional hotelier/accommodation provider versus that of an Airbnb host (Figures 1 & 2), as well as a taxi drivers journey in comparison to that of an Uber driver (Figures 3 & 4). Analyzing the text within these images and graphs will expose the framing which occurs as well as any biases that may exist.

In the description of both hotel operator and Airbnb Host (Figures 1 &4), the graphic includes biographical information on the individuals including name, age, ethnicity and role. The
feature of race in the description of the workers is a noteworthy one. At first glance one may ask what could be the purpose of including this aspect and should race even be relevant when discussing employment? While we can only speculate the reasons the MaRS Lab included the race of the worker, the fact that it is there should be more of a reason for the presentation to include some pertinent information on how race relations are manifesting in the sharing economy. However, it fails to do so.

As discussed in the literature review, discrimination can be considered an innate quality of sharing economy platforms. Through ratings and profiles, users of these platforms are often able to determine with whom they choose to interact with. Airbnb has become particularly notorious for the discrimination among users, with users with African American names less likely to be accepted as an accommodation guest in comparison to users with white names (Edelman & al, 2017). The MaRS Lab graphics do not address any racial discriminatory matters, but rather reinforce the ethnicity as a notable component of sharing economy transactions.

After introducing the traditional hotelier/accommodation provider, Airbnb host, taxi driver and Uber driver, the presentation follows with each person’s “journey”. This includes a graph which outlines the preparation and operation of each journey. The graphs are then duplicated and include added annotations highlighting positive and negative aspects of each person’s journey.

Beginning with the hotel operator/hotelier journey (Figure 2), the permits/licenses and inspections requirements are particularly lengthy. In these sections are permits such as fire code, building code and public health which are required when preparing an accommodation for rental. Inspections such as fire marshal, employment standard act and a WSIB (Workplace Safety and Insurance Board) audit are also required. The annotated version of the journey (Figure 3) points
out that the regulatory system is difficult to navigate and increases the time and cost of a project. It also expresses that “regulations may be cumbersome, but industry accepts its value towards public interest” (MaRs, 2015).

The Airbnb host journey (Figure 5) contains notably less requirements, with most of the focus on the creation of an online profile, identity verification and a safety checklist. The operation consists of a booking request and either a selection or rejection of the booking. The annotated version (Figure 6) notes that the start-up preparation required for an Airbnb host is easy and immediate, and the only bylaws of concern are taken care of by condominiums. The downfalls noted are that “safety methods (are) discovered through problem guests” and that “guests may disappear” (MaRS, 2015).

The words and phrases used to describe the Airbnb host’s journey carry more positive connotations than those of the hotelier’s journey. The graphs emphasize the long list of permits and inspections one must take as a hotelier, and although there is mention that these regulations are in place for public interest, there is still an emphasis on the lengthiness of this process. The Airbnb journey with annotations, immediately notes the preparation is “easy and immediate”, cutting out all required regulations one would traditionally encounter. Other than the safety issues and the last point made about guests disappearing, the presentation omits any real downfalls associated with the Airbnb journey. This dichotomy is clearly set up as a means of framing the sharing economy process as much easier than a traditional one. Again, the idea of frictionless transactions made possible with technology/these platforms. While it is true that the process of listing an accommodation on Airbnb will be much easier than starting a Bed and Breakfast for example, one must note the reasons why so many permits and licenses may be required in the first place. While most Airbnb transactions occur without any serious issues, as
with anything there does however remain cases where either the accommodation provider or guests have negative experiences (Bradford, 2014). There tends to be again a celebratory discourse used throughout the texts instead of addressing why regulations and policies should be put in place to ensure less negative experiences for everyone in the sharing economy.

The next graphics include a taxi driver journey, as well as an Uber driver journey. The traditional taxi journey (Figure 8) draws out the requirements for driving a taxi, followed by the different options in terms of renting or owning a taxi, and ends with key points such as driver inspection renewals and log sheets (for HST & income tax purposes). The annotated version of the graphic (Figure 9) makes mention of the high cost of entry to taxi driving, the full-time course required to train and the ATM machine surcharge. When referring to rental fees for taxi’s, there is a note which states that there is a rental fee regardless of earnings and a “middleman decides how much to charge” (MaRs, 2015). This annotation presupposes that with Uber there is no middleman, no regulation in pricing, and ultimately frictionless. This aligns with the dominant narrative that there is no corporate mediation between service provider and user of sharing platforms. While in reality, there still remains a corporation (larger than any taxi company) regulating the terms of employment and how much customers are being charged.

The Uber driver journey graph (Figure 11), similar to the Airbnb graph, appears to be much more simple and there are less requirements for the preparation of being an Uber driver. It outlines the general requirements such as vehicle registration, insurance, and photo ID. There is also mention of the 4.7 rating Uber drivers must maintain to stay active. The annotated version (Figure 12) makes notes of the seemingly positive aspects of driving with Uber. It includes points about the low cost and convenience of entry, the absence of training and the fact that a
fare is always guaranteed (due to the requirement of linking a credit card to the platform in order to use the application on your mobile phone).

There is also a note which states that drivers are unaware what kind of insurance coverage Uber has, but “are comfortable with the ambiguity” (MaRs, 2015). This point being made is somewhat problematic seeing as a lot of Uber’s struggle has come from properly insuring drivers and riders. In Canada currently, Ontario and Alberta are the only two provinces in which drivers and riders are automatically covered by Intact insurance, a Canadian provider of home, auto and business insurance (Intact Insurance, 2017). The policy includes “uninsured motorist coverage and third-party liability of up to $1 million while the app is in use but no ride has been accepted and $2 million after a ride has been accepted”, however “collision and comprehensive coverage to apply, the vehicle owner must be covered in that way under their personal policy” (The Canadian Press, 2016).

Furthermore, there is mention that drivers of Uber may tolerate abusive customers in fear of lower ratings. This relates back to the notion of control Uber has through the rating system utilized on the platform. One side of this is the customers being controlled by the rating system, ensuring a higher rating allows a more likelihood that a driver will want to pick you up. However, a big focus is on the drivers. If an Uber driver goes under a 4.7 rating they could be immediately terminated. “Even though drivers know ratings are averaged and that one rating should not make a difference, drivers express much care and dissatisfaction anytime their rating goes down” (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016, p. 3775). With such focus on the rating, as the graphic mentions, a driver will more likely tolerate undesirable conditions with a customer in fear of a bad rating. Following the graphics on the page, points of concern from both traditional companies and sharing companies are expressed.
“Self-Regulation: the power of reviews: Anything that your staff does shows up (online) the next day. That level of interaction increases the quality across the board because now you can write a review that sticks and spreads. People are competing to be a better class property by competing for these good reviews. It keeps everyone on their toes. We motivate our staff with reviews - Hostel Owner” (City of Toronto, 2015).

Interestingly, reviewing systems have become predominantly associated with companies in the sharing economy, even though it became commonplace years ago with the creation of platforms such as Ebay and Craigslist. “As online commerce businesses grew, this necessitated the need for certain measures to engender trust and ensure accountability within these exchanges” (Becker & Rajwani, 2016, p. 23). Now, Uber requiring you to leave a rating for your driver once you take a ride, Airbnb allowing you to read through reviews before booking your accommodations, are just a few examples of how the practice of ratings has become intrinsic to the functioning of the sharing economy.

Therefore, in this case the City of Toronto goes against the mainstream dominant narrative, focusing the matter of reviews on traditional accommodation providers.

“Condominium Boards as Regulators: One of the reasons my condo banned Airbnb is because they don't want people coming in and out for safety reasons. It's funny because I don't choose my neighbour, they could be a serial killer. Whereas Airbnb you're verified, your social networks are all connected. I think it's even more safe - Airbnb Host” (MaRs, 2015).

While the concern expressed by the host is a valid one, it alludes to the idea that the verification process and review database offers users a safer experience as an Airbnb user than traditional accommodations would. At the end of the day, users of sharing economy companies are still just strangers as you would encounter through traditional services. This specific statement can be drawn back to Sundararajan’s (2016) argument about trust being built through the validation of external institutions, whether government or nongovernment (p. 63).

Considering Coleman’s (1990) definition of trust, “a willingness to commit a collaborative effort
before you know how the other person will behave”, the quote provided by the Airbnb host reinforces that there is feeling of trust that has been established in the sharing economy through the reputation system and validation by external institutions. The host feels that having an Airbnb guest in their home/condo is safer than having a random neighbour who has not been verified nor is their social network profile available for access. This is generally the dominant sharing economy narrative. Including this statement by the Airbnb host is of value for the author as it reinforces the idea of verification through these platforms. It allows readers to understand the views and opinions of sharing economy participants, however, at no point does the website include possible risks and therefore omits this arguably key information the public should rightfully be exposed to.

Slee (2016) notes that despite the talk of community, Airbnb has no regard for rules and regulations that are in place to ensure the functioning of tenants and landlords within communities (p. 41). With some Airbnb hosts constantly renting out their space through the platform, neighbors will constantly have a new wave of strangers entering their condominiums/apartments/neighborhoods, and so on. Having to encounter strangers constantly may put neighbors at risk. “The only logic [Airbnb] seems to understand is that of the free market: the right of property owners to do what they want with their property” (Slee, 2016, p.41).

Accessibility for all passengers also becomes an issue that arises with Uber’s transportation policies. The presentation includes the opinion of an Uber driver on this issue:

Accessibility: I used to use the dispatch services of Beck², but had to change to independent because Beck had a rule that forced drivers to help disabled and elderly customers with their luggage. Because of my health conditions and back injury, I could not do that. So, I switched to Uber -Uber taxi driver” (MaRs, 2015).

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² Beck is a Toronto based traditional taxi service provider
City transportation regulations are in place to ensure fair and safe transportation options for all riders. Uber steers away from these regulations because of their classification as a technology company, rather than a transportation one. This demonstrates once again the avoidance of laws and regulations that is done by sharing economy companies. Uber has notoriously dealt with scrutiny from accessibility advocates who believe the company is not doing enough to offer equal and safe access to all riders. The lack of wheelchair accessible vehicles has been a big point of contention. In New York for example, Uber was sued by disability rights groups with accusations that the company is violating New York City “human rights laws by failing to make enough of its vehicles accessible to disabled people” (Stempel, 2017). Riders requiring wheelchair accessible vehicles have dealt with lengthy wait times or have not been able to get rides at all. The above text foregrounds and frames a potentially positive point of view from an Uber driver who does not have to help a disabled customer with luggage, but it fails to recognize the bigger picture of accessible vehicles and the discrimination being faced by some customers.

**Ontario Chamber of Commerce: Harnessing the Power of the Sharing Economy**

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce presentation can be found under the heading *Harnessing the Power of the Sharing Economy*. The first paragraph includes statistics about Uber and the funding platform Borrowell received. “The numbers tell the story… Ontarians are already there: There are 400,000+ Uber riders in Toronto alone. $5.4 million in funding received by online marketplace lending platform Borrowell to launch in 2015” (Ontario Chamber of Commerce, 2015). By beginning the report as such, the OCC attempts to emphasize the scale of

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3 Borrowell is a peer-to-peer lending platform, which allows Canadians to obtain fixed-rate loans at low interest rates (Borrowell, 2017). It is a relatively unknown sharing economy in terms of popularity and in
the sharing economy, in particular Uber within Toronto/Ontario. Introducing the presentation by saying “Ontarians are already there”, insinuates that the citizens of the province are currently ahead of the government in terms of adopting sharing companies.

While the aim of the OCC may have been to highlight a Canadian sharing company, in the grand scheme of things, $5.4 million is relatively insignificant. Airbnb for example, has raised $800 million USD since 2009. Transportation company Lyft has raised over $300 million USD in almost one year alone (Slee, 2017, p. 24). There is no further elaboration or even explanation as to what Borrowell even is and what it is doing for Canadians. This statistic seems out of place and unnecessary for the reader of the text.

Throughout the presentation, there are several phrases on the webpage which topicalize certain subjects. As Huckin (1997) notes, topicalization is considered foregrounding at the sentence level. “Sharing economy firms either: Own goods or provide services that they rent to customers, often on a short-term basis, or create peer-to-peer platforms connecting providers and users for the exchange, purchase, or renting of goods and services” (Ontario Chamber of Commerce, 2015).

While one may be inclined to believe that you would not have to rent/share an asset from a traditional business, what is missing from this simplistic definition is that there is still a business present in your sharing transaction. The multimillion dollar, sometimes billion dollar corporations behind most of these platforms are in fact dictating the terms and conditions of “sharing”, and omitting their presence from the explanation of the sharing economy is problematic.
As Srnicek (2017) noted, although platforms present themselves as empty spaces for others to interact on, the platform owners will set the rules of “product and service development, as well as marketplace interactions” (p. 47). This is a key downfall of the sharing economy discourse. The celebratory nature of the discourse presented originally by sharing companies, has led to the illusion of this empty space to which Srnicek (2017) refers.

However, the reality is that corporate mediation and capitalist ambitions are still at the centre of these companies. Some have even argued that Uber, a posterchild for the sharing economy, is capitalism at its worst (Klinger, 2016).

The Ontario has the chance to be a first mover section includes phrases such as “protecting public interest while supporting innovation”. There is no mention of what actually is in the publics best interest. It also goes on to state that if channeled properly, “the sharing economy can create value for consumers by creating competition”. The concept of competition is one closely aligned with the values of capitalism. This leads us to question how different is the sharing economy from a traditional capitalist one.

The presentation also goes on to explain that Ontarians don’t want services such as Uber banned.

“It’s appropriate to demand that Uber play fair, but the rules of the game should themselves be fair and designed to benefit consumers. …Political leaders in Canada should feel emboldened to enable the innovators rather than erect roadblocks to keep them out. – Globe & Mail” (Ontario Chamber of Commerce, 2015).

This is one of the brief mention of negativity towards sharing economy companies. This section does foreground some opposition that occurs, but does nothing to develop why services like Uber are being banned in some places. Therefore, this is considered as backgrounding of this information. This section would have been an ideal opportunity to offer some critique and a counternarrative to the traditional celebratory discourse. However, it fails to do so.
Ontario Chamber of Commerce Recommendations:

**Recommendation #1**: Establish a cross-jurisdictional taskforce with representation from government, thought leaders, and industry (including existing operators and new market entrants) with a mandate to analyze the opportunities and impacts of the sharing economy and make comprehensive recommendations.

**Recommendation #2**: Use the advent of the sharing economy as an opportunity to develop a new, “empty the box” approach to regulation, building on the taskforce’s research, analysis, and recommendations. This approach to regulatory reform keeps intact only those provisions that are necessary and relevant today.

**Recommendation #3**: Engage industry to fill any gaps in insurance coverage.

**Recommendation #4**: Consider the impacts of the growth of the sharing economy as it undertakes reviews of workplace legislation.

**Recommendation #5**: Work with the federal government to develop a ‘how-to’ guide on tax compliance in the sharing economy.

**Recommendation #6**: Analyze income reporting levels in the sharing economy and develop a clear understanding of the motivating factors behind providers’ decisions to report or not report income, and establish and clarify appropriate rules moving forward (e.g. minimum income thresholds)” (Ontario Chamber of Commerce, 2015).

The first recommendation includes a list of representation that should be included in a “taskforce” to analyze the opportunities and impacts of the sharing economy. In this recommendation there is an omission/deletion of agents. No worker or labour representation is included or suggested. Rather, there is an emphasis solely on government and industry officials being present in this said taskforce. Ideally, there would be representation from a wider range of stakeholders, including government, industry, labour and workers. This would allow for all types of issues arising in the sharing economy, such as those of labour and workers’ rights that have been mentioned, to be accounted for and not just those which affect certain groups of interests.

The second recommendation alludes to the unnecessary regulations which are currently halting the functioning of some sharing economy companies. Slee (2016) argues that the sharing economy is a movement for deregulation (p. 26). Deregulation has been a primary tenant of
neoliberalism, pushing for free-markets and privatization (Lie & Thorsen, 2006). Aligning with neoliberal capitalism, can be considered as challenging the rules made by “democratic city governments in order to reshape cities in their own interests” (Slee, 2016, p. 27). This demonstrates the perpetuation of the dominant sharing economy narrative. The City of Toronto’s website ultimately features discourse which aligns with capitalistic intentions which make up sharing companies and ties in to a key quality of neoliberalism.

Both the third and fourth recommendations are relatively vague descriptions. They do not address the actual issues present with both gaps in insurance coverage, nor the wide array of impacts the sharing economy is having on the traditional workplace. There is simply a statement of issues to potentially address, leaving the reader to speculate deeper meanings. As has repeatedly occurred throughout the website, there is an omission of the workers/contracts being affected and those who truly need regulation and structure to the new precarious work environment.

The fifth and sixth recommendations focus on tax compliance in the sharing economy. There is a focus on income reporting levels and a call for an attempt to understand the motivational factors of those who choose to report or not report their income attained through the sharing economy. A problem present with sharing companies is that its employees have been genuinely unaware that they should be claiming income earned through these platforms. A large number of users see the employment generated as side gigs to earn some supplementary income. This however, has left taxi drivers in particular feeling a disadvantage once again seeing as they must pay taxes for doing an entirely similar job. Tax avoidance is now becoming harder and Airbnb and Uber have both begun emailing accommodation renters and drivers with reminders to report their income (Alini, 2017).
Notably backgrounded from the talk of taxes within the presentation, are the sharing companies which are notoriously evading tax compliance in the countries they operate. In 2016, The Canadian Revenue Agency (CRA) attempted to audit Uber and claimed in a Federal Court filing that “the company provided no response or partial responses to most requests to see its files” (AdvocateDaily, 2016). However, it is believed that the CRA is also more concerned with workers than the actual company itself. In countries such as France, sharing economy companies are coming under more fire than ever for tax evasion. EU finance ministers are insisting companies pay their fair share of taxes. The French economy minister Bruno Le Maire stated: “These digital platforms make tens of millions of sales and the French treasury gets a few tens of thousands. Many digital platforms operating in the EU have a base in Ireland, including Airbnb, where they can exploit a low corporation tax regime” (Boffey, 2017). The recommendation in the presentation foregrounds solely the responsibilities of workers. In order for a fair playing field to be developed, governments need to focus on tax compliance from every perspective of the sharing economy. This includes both workers and platforms.

All the recommendations featured by The Ontario Chamber of Commerce are relatively vague and reinforce dominant narratives of the sharing economy. It ends the presentation with an outlook on the potential of the city’s role within the sharing economy. As with most of the content featured throughout the presentations on the webpage, this section of the presentation offers no insight to advance workable solutions to the problem of precarity that is expanding within the sharing economy but rather offers often ambiguous suggestions for the city.
V. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the discourse of the representation of sharing economy within the context of a municipal government’s discourse. The analysis of The City of Toronto’s sharing economy webpage which was made up of three presentations addressing the sharing economy was intended for the general public was guided by a research question which established the goals for the study: To what extent does the municipal government of Toronto provide a favourable representation of the sharing economy, one that aligns closely with the dominant corporate narrative? By conducting a critical discourse analysis and focusing on the materials that were being presented to the intended audience of the webpage, it was possible to understand the narrative the City of Toronto perpetuated. The study provided evidence which demonstrated that the city’s discourse did align primarily with the dominant corporate narrative.

Studying digital objects comes with some challenges. The ephemeral nature of websites leaves the possibility of the unit of analysis to be removed, as was the case for the material analyzed in this research project. Although the city indicates that the removal of the website is due to website migration that is occurring, we are able to speculate that the removal may have come down to the fact that some policies are now in effect in the city of Toronto concerning short-term rentals. In December 2017, the city approved regulations which limited the rental of property. The policy’s main components were the amount of time one can rent a property. It allows only the rental “of a principal residence only and homeowners won’t be allowed to list secondary suites, such as a basement apartment, for short-term rental. Entire home rentals will be capped at 180 days a year” (The Canadian Press, 2017). Perhaps the presentations made at the forum ultimately informed the decisions of policy makers, which makes the findings of even
more importance. What the policy makers found of importance while creating the policies was perhaps informed by the texts of this webpage.

Several findings overlapped throughout all of the presentations featured on the site. These occurred at all three levels of the text: the text as a whole, sentence-by-sentence, and the word level. Throughout the several texts (presentations) analyzed on the City of Toronto’s sharing economy webpage, the most common element was omissions. On one hand, there was omission of important agents such as the worker and worker’s unions when discussing matters of policy and regulation creation or amendments. However, when it came to describing the potential of the sharing economy, we then were able to see an omission of the corporations actually behind these sharing economy companies. There was no point throughout the several presentations or anywhere else on the site, a mention of the corporate mediation that occurs within sharing economy transactions. There continues to be a false idea that throughout all transactions that occur within the sharing economy, the only parties present are the owner of the asset and a potential user/consumer. While there is no denying that technology brings a lot of ease to several aspects of our lives, and in this case it connects us to several goods and services easily, there is danger in stating that it is relatively frictionless and safe without also noting the dangers and difficulties one might encounter. Pasquale (2016) notes, existing inequalities are often entrenched within the sharing economy, sometimes the way a company functions may reinforce discrimination and biases among its users.

The results of the analysis suggested that the sharing economy as a whole was framed exclusively as a positive phenomenon for the city. The definitions and descriptions provided throughout the webpage provided a glorified narrative and rarely eluded to any potential negative drawbacks within the sharing economy. For a non-specialist or critical reader, the information
foregrounded can easily go unquestioned. Coming from a position of power (a municipal government), the texts hold authority to a certain degree. Certain ideals were highlighted, while important issues of labour and workplace security were backgrounded.

A critical examination and analysis demonstrated that certain ideals were ultimately propagated through the texts. The presentations on the webpage reinforced the dominant narrative of frictionless transactions. There is an insinuation that all transactions that are part of the sharing economy and take place thanks to technology will be effortless and without difficulty. Insinuations are “slyly suggestive” and “because of its deniability can be a powerful tool in discourse” (Huckin, 1997, p. 7). The analysis demonstrated the perpetuation of the idea that technology creates a smooth, “frictionless” market, similar to the celebratory discourse the internet once had. However, this presupposition does not allow for readers to critically raise questions about the nature of the sharing economy and the work it produces.

According to the literature, mainstream accounts of the sharing economy tend to feature a very celebratory narrative about sharing companies. There is a false idea created that sharing is at the center of this “new economy” and that the crowd is not replacing the corporation in transactions, while in fact, it is not really new after all. However, scholars are beginning to study the effects of sharing economy companies and giants such as Uber and Airbnb and are offering a necessary critical counternarrative. As noted, the precarious nature of work that is being created leaves workers at a great disadvantage without several forms of workplace security.

Although the website is not a city resident’s only source of information on the topic, the authority which the municipality holds affects the role this information plays. By reinforcing a dominant narrative, the municipality’s webpage disseminates certain ideals to the public. And while the analysis covered just a small sample of discourse this case study exemplifies the
discourse being circulated by municipalities and the way in which only a mainstream dominant narrative is shared.
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64


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APPENDICIES

Figure 1

Figure 2

Hotelier Journey
Figure 3

Accommodation Journeys

Figure 4

NAME Melissa
AGE 32
ETHNICITY East Asian
ROLE Airbnb Host/Marketer

Melissa moved in with her boyfriend and decided to rent her place on Airbnb because friends of hers recommended it.
Mohamed immigrated with his family from Pakistan and couldn’t find work within Agricultural Sciences. A relative recommended he consider a job as a taxi driver.

Taxi Driver Journey

**Preparation**
- 18+ Y/O, Driver's License, Citizen/PR
- Canada-wide Criminal Background Check
- Register for Taxi Training
- Taxi Fees
- CPR Training
- Driving History

**Operation**
- Rent/Lease
- Hail Platform
- Direct
- Meter
- Corporate/Income Tax
- HST
- Log Sheet
- Cash
- Credit
- Debt
- Renewals
- Driver Inspection
- Insurance
- Maintenance
- Vehicle Inspection
Transportation Journeys

Figure 9

Figure 10

NAME Peter
AGE 33
ETHNICITY Vietnamese
ROLE UberX Driver/Busboy

Peter is completing his undergraduate degree and has inconsistent shift work at a family-owned restaurant.
Figure 11

UberX Driver Journey

Figure 12

Transportation Journeys
VITA AUCTORIS

Samar El-Khatib was born in 1991 in Windsor, Ontario. She graduated from École secondaire E.J. Lajeunesse in 2009. From there she went on to the University of Windsor where she obtained a B.A. in French and Communication, Media & Film in 2015. She is currently a candidate for the Master's degree in Communication and Social Justice at the University of Windsor and hopes to graduate in Spring 2018.