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Saving time, saving money, saving the planet, 'one gift at a time': a practice-centred exploration of free online reuse exchange

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Abstract

Online reuse networks seek to reduce waste by connecting people who have something they no longer want with others who might have a use for it. The intention is that 'everyone wins': givers are saved the hassle of disposal, recipients save money and the ecological burden of consumption is eased. Existing research has tended to focus on individuals' motivations for involvement. As part of a wider study of how alternative consumption practices become embedded in everyday life, this paper follows a different line of enquiry, taking its orientation from how theories of practice conceptualise what people do and how this changes. The initial emphasis is on establishing 'what sort of practice' free online reuse is, what makes it different from other ways of acquiring and disposing, and on identifying its constituent materials, competences and meanings. The focus then shifts to how these elements are variably integrated in the performance of reuse. First, what are the implications for how people go about giving and receiving when small details are changed relative to other similar practices? Findings suggest that technologically mediated reuse 'communities' connect some people but exclude others. Eliminating money from the exchange process gives participants access to goods they would otherwise struggle to afford, but at the same time raises questions as to how goods are allocated, potentially privileging other unequally distributed material and cultural resources. Second, the meanings of reuse vary from context to context, in turn corresponding to different kinds of performance. Any given performance can, meanwhile, belong to a number of different practices at the same time.

Keywords: waste, reuse, consumption, practice theory

Biographical note

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1. Introduction

Last week a man in a hatchback came to collect a big, half-broken 'four-by-twelve' speaker cabinet that, for the past five years, had served as a makeshift shelf for our recycling boxes. It was a relief to see it go, at last replaced by a more effective storage solution, but loading it out brought back unexpectedly fond memories: years spent lugging the thing in and out of pubs, clubs and community centres; up and down stairs, service lifts, fire escapes; round and round motorways and ring roads.

Four days earlier I was carrying a nest of tables – no longer needed and taking up space – out to a couple's car; they were helping their daughter set up home for the first time. I apologised that the tables were dusty. They said it was fine.

A few years ago I picked up a huge wooden desk from a family in the neighbourhood. It looks like the sort that school teachers used to sit behind. Sometimes I imagine how it was used, what sat on desktops before desktop computers. How I'll look back on all this time I currently spend sitting at it, trying to write.

When we give and receive these items for free, in the process connecting with nearby strangers online, what is it that we are doing? De-cluttering the home? Clearing space for new things? Avoiding a trip to the municipal dump or the charity shop? Tying up emotional loose ends and unravelling new ones? Giving a gift to someone in need? Getting something we want for free? Saving much-needed money to spend elsewhere? Realising the dormant or forgotten value in things, extending their useful lives? Expanding social networks? Building community? Reducing waste and our harmful impact on the planet? Radically prefiguring a postcapitalist economy?

As part of a wider study of reuse practices – finding value in items otherwise classed as waste, and trying to put them (back) to use – this article focuses on what I call *free online reuse exchange*.[1] Adopting an approach informed by theories of practice (e.g. Shove et al, 2012), my concern here is with 'what kind of practice' this phenomenon is, identifying its key features as a form of giving and receiving, and attempting to distinguish it from other, similar or overlapping practices. By temporarily abstracting free online reuse to its constituent 'elements', I set out to investigate what happens when small details of how we acquire and dispose of things – for instance the rules of exchange, or the mechanism for connecting people – are changed. I also explore the variations in performing a given practice that are implicated in its reproduction and transformation.

This paper will look at two particular online 'gifting communities': Freecycle and Freegle. Both are networks of local, volunteer-run groups that use electronic message boards and mailing lists to 'match people who have things they want to get rid of with people who can use them' (Freecycle, 2006). Members post messages to their local group offering or requesting goods free of charge, others respond to these posts, and givers and recipients meet in person to complete the transaction.

2. Background

Freecycle originated in the US in May 2003 as a way of finding homes for unwanted things – initially office equipment and domestic furniture – not catered for by existing recycling schemes or second-hand spaces (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). Freegle was then established in

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[1] Reuse exchange denotes that surplus items are donated or sold outside of originating households (Gregson et al, 2013). By free I mean that nothing is offered in return. By online I mean that givers and recipients establish contact via an Internet-based mechanism, distinguishing this form of giving from, say, those involving existing family and friends. For the sake of brevity and variety, I also use the terms *online gifting* and *online reuse*.

September 2009 as a UK-based alternative by ex-Freecycle volunteers unhappy with what they felt was an erosion of local autonomy. Groups migrated, intact, from one organisation to the other, retaining membership and functionality (Glaskin, 2009; Lewis, 2009). Although differing in organisational structure and decision-making processes, Freegle closely resembles Freecycle in its ethos and day-to-day operation, at least from the perspective of its members.[2]

This article will focus primarily on experiences of reuse *in cities* within the predominantly urbanised United Kingdom. At their core, reuse networks are concerned with two historically 'urban' problems: waste and social disintegration. It is worth briefly noting how each issue informs the discursive backdrop to the emergence of online gifting, even if a thorough critique is beyond the scope of the present discussion.[3]

First, Freecycle and Freegle exist to divert goods from landfill. Large concentrations of people in settled locations have always faced the dilemma of what to do with their refuse (Melosi, 2005; Kennedy, 2007). The connection between city living and problematic waste generation has, however, become particularly pronounced in (late) modern, (post-)industrial societies (Gandy, 1994; Zapata Campos and Hall, 2013), partly reflecting a quantitative increase in consumption compared with traditional village life. For Smart (2010), profligate consumption arises from macroeconomic reliance on a continual turnover of goods: 'Waste is a direct corollary of the objective at the center of consumer society, to continually increase the supply of commodities' through novelty and obsolescence (p.165; see also Bauman, 2007).

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[2] Several participants in my research were members of both Freecycle and Freegle groups. Some were more aware than others of the historical reasons for their separation, but experiences of the two were typically discussed interchangeably.

[3] Both issues are already the subject of extensive critical discussion. The notion of a 'throwaway society' is challenged by Rathje and Murphy (2001), Gregson et al (2007a; 2007b) and Evans (2012). For critique of the individualisation thesis in its various guises see Wellman and Leighton (1979), Ladd (1999), Boggs (2001), Fischer (2005) and Dawson (2012).

Strasser (1999) sees waste as a matter of 'sorting': the high turnover of goods stems from changes in what we classify as wanted and unwanted, combined with a decline in the skills and time required to mend and re-purpose soiled or damaged things.

Second, online reuse networks are fundamentally about *connectivity*: putting people in touch with other people. From the outset, urban sociology has been concerned with the impact – usually negatively framed – of cities on how people relate to one another (Lin and Mele, 2013). More recent accounts note an intensification of individualising processes during the 20th century (Bauman, 2001a; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). While traditional forms of solidarity were replaced in the modern city by still relatively solid modes of association – citizenship, nationality, political affiliation, class consciousness – late modernity, it is argued, entails a further erosion of these categories, leaving individuals increasingly isolated and responsible for making their own way in the world. Putnam (2000) takes a much shorter view, charting a decline in civic engagement following a peak in the 1950s and a corresponding decline in the cohesive force he calls 'social capital'.

Dedicated research on Freecycle and Freegle is limited, but slowly growing. The first publication was a small-scale quantitative study (Nelson et al, 2007) of participants' different motivations: a desire for a 'simpler life', 'self-oriented needs and wants' (free stuff, saving money), environmental considerations, and helping others. With its focus on primary motivations, the study gave little consideration to competing rationales, such as being simultaneously motivated by private gain and ethical concerns, let alone how different priorities were negotiated in practice.

Elsewhere Freecycle is explored as a gift economy, specifically one characterised by what Sahlins (2004) terms generalised reciprocity. Strangers 'freely give' without expecting a direct return, understanding that this activity will sustain the group as a whole, perpetuating the continued giving of gifts (Nelson and Rademacher, 2009: 906; Willer et al, 2012). Guillard and Del Bucchia (2012) take a different tack, examining the 'interpersonal encounter' between giver and recipient rather than wider group solidarity. Freecycle and similar mechanisms 'liberate' givers from a number of anxieties otherwise associated with giving: eliminating the 'risk of refusal', allowing the giver to meet the recipient and imagine the object's future, and facilitating 'an expression of spontaneous gratitude, which enhances the giver's self-esteem without engaging them in a bond of dependence' (pp.59-60).

3. Research focus and approach

Existing research, then, emphasises individual motivations and tries variously to explain participation or understand its meaning for participants. Comparatively little consideration is given to *how* people come to use these alternative means of getting and giving: how do alternatives establish themselves as part of a repertoire of conceivable, possible, appropriate, even normal ways of consuming? How is the use of Freecycle and Freegle accommodated alongside other, ongoing patterns of acquisition, use and disposal?

These questions, central to my own research, assume 'behaviour change' to be more complicated than individuals consciously choosing a different course of action. Such an assumption is at odds with what Shove (2010) calls the 'ABC model', the broad paradigm underlying dominant policy approaches which sees attitudes as the *determinants* of behaviour. Disconnects between attitudes and behaviour – the value-action gap – are explained in terms

of a series of external, contextual factors, personal attributes and cognitive understandings of habit (e.g. Stern, 2000).[4]

Instead, Shove advocates a *practice*-based approach to understanding what people do and how that changes. Emphasis is shifted from individual agents, their behavioural orientations and the constraints they face, to the emergence, development and disappearance of social practices. Crucially, this approach identifies a recursive relationship between two senses of 'practice': *performances* 'enacted in specific moments and places', and their relatively enduring but always contingent patterns, or practices-as-*entities* (Shove, 2010: 1279). Practices are sites of both reproduction and innovation (Warde, 2005). Each individual action is 'governed' by 'a set of established understandings, procedures and objectives' often pursued 'without much reflection or conscious awareness' (p.140). However, 'practices also contain the seeds of constant change' (p.141), only existing in their repeated performance, itself subject to significant variation. Normality is at best provisional, requiring 'constant reproduction' (Shove, 2010: 1279).

My own research uses practice-based understandings of reproduction and innovation to explore how people come to engage in alternative ways of consuming, considering the biographies or 'careers' (Shove et al, 2012) of both the practices and their practitioners: how different (social) patterns of getting and giving emerge and evolve, and how they are adopted into (individual) people's lives. This paper focuses on the first of these questions.

I draw on both primary and secondary data: Freecycle and Freegle's online documentation; in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 24 members in four UK cities (Brighton & Hove,

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[4] For a critical commentary on the 'ABC' model, a summary of its theoretical underpinnings in social psychology and examples of relevant implementations in public policy, see Shove (2010) and Hargreaves (2011). For an extensive review of approaches within this broad 'behaviour change' paradigm see Jackson (2005).

Coventry, Edinburgh and Sheffield); and, to a lesser extent, online surveys of 4400 Freecycle members and 4608 Freegle members, resident throughout the UK.

The elements of practice

My intention is to map the boundaries of free online reuse as a practice, seeking to (a) isolate the particular components (Schatzki, 1996; 2002) or elements (Shove et al, 2012) that make it identifiable from other forms of acquisition and disposal, and (b) consider the implications of these distinctive features for how people go about getting and getting rid of things. A number of conceptual questions concerning the approach will be raised in the process.

What makes isolated doings and sayings 'hang together' as an intelligible practice, distinguishable from other practices, are their shared elements (Schatzki, 2002). Conversely, interconnections between elements are formed and sustained only 'in and through integrative moments of practice-as-performance' (Shove et al, 2012: 22). Following Shove and colleagues I use three distinct categories of element to structure my analysis: materials, meanings and competences. Materials are 'objects, infrastructures, tools, hardware and the body itself' (2012: 23). Meanings refer to 'symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations', while competences include 'skill, know-how and technique' (p.14), often formalised in procedures (Warde, 2005) or rules (Schatzki, 1996; 2002).

'Mapping' practices-as-entities, and the elements which compose them, is useful for understanding social reproduction and change – essentially how practices emerge, survive, evolve and die out – in four ways. First, it allows practices to be defined and distinguished: what makes it meaningful to treat isolated acts as part of the same practice, or to think of one practice as distinct from another? Second, it draws attention to interdependencies between

elements, enabling an analysis of what happens to other elements, and the practice(s) they constitute, when one element changes. Third, it provides a benchmark for analysing variations in performance, and the impact of those variations on the practice. While 'ideal' ways of performing can be codified as rules or instructions, actual performances do not necessarily adhere to these codes (Warde, 2005; 2013). Fourth, it can highlight 'overlaps' between practices, either through shared elements or through performances which are simultaneously examples of more than one practice (Schatzki, 2002). Similarly, this allows consideration of the impact of elements migrating from one practice to another, or from one social or spatial context to another (Shove and Pantzar, 2005; 2007).

Here I use the practice model as a heuristic device to explore free online reuse exchange as a sort of 'experiment' (leaving aside the epistemological connotations of that term) in organising consumption differently. Drawing on the above four points, I frame discussion around four key research questions:

1. What elements define free online reuse 'as a practice' and distinguish it from other practices?

2. What happens to acquisition and disposal when these distinctive elements are introduced?

3. How do performances of online gifting vary?

4. Where are the points of overlap with other practices?

4. Findings (1): Defining free online reuse exchange 'as a practice'

First, I look at the key defining features of free online reuse. By temporarily separating out its constituent parts – materials, competences, meanings – I draw attention to what is distinctive about the practice (as well as beginning to identify specific points of overlap with other

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practices), before stressing strong interdependencies between the different elements. Later I will apply these abstractions to the experience of engaging in online reuse in order to address the remaining three questions above.

Materials: jam jars and the World Wide Web

Key to delimiting free online reuse are its material elements: objects, infrastructures and technologies. The clearest example is the interface used to connect people: online messages posted to a group forum and emailing list. This of course presupposes access to certain other technologies and infrastructures, not least an Internet connection and a computer, smartphone or tablet.

Material elements also include the objects given and received. Examples cited in interviews varied enormously, from scraps of fabric and empty jam jars, via baby clothes and children's toys, to furniture, domestic appliances, bikes and cars. Of particular interest is how different objects were associated with different meanings, together helping to account for variations within the practice and connections with a diverse array of other practices. I will return to this in section five.

Focusing momentarily on material elements begins to establish what makes Freecycle and Freegle distinctive. The physical differences from, say, visiting a retail outlet or a civic disposal site are immediately apparent. Even within the informal second-hand sector there are differences worth noting. Online message boards and mailing lists are more dynamic than classified adverts in newspapers, but they remain less interactive than auction sites such as eBay. The infrastructure distinguishes online reuse from traditional ways of passing goods on

to family and friends as 'hand-me-downs', putting the giver in contact with a much wider audience of potential recipients.

However, there are also considerable continuities – shared material elements – with other acquisition and divestment practices. Posts on Freecycle and Freegle closely follow the format of printed and online classified adverts. More generally, Internet-based technologies are widely used for buying and selling goods, while the types of object given and received are by no means unique to online reuse groups. Consideration of the material elements has begun to identify boundaries between online gifting and other proximate practices, but is not sufficient in itself.

Competences: rules and their skilled negotiation

A second set of elements are competences (Shove et al, 2012), practical understandings and rules (Schatzki, 1996; 2002). It is arguably the latter, the formalised rules and guidelines, which most clearly sketch out distinctions between free online reuse and other, materially similar practices.[5]

Most fundamental is the rule that all items must be given free of charge. Transactions offering or requesting money in return are expressly forbidden, as are swaps of goods for other goods (Freecycle FAQ, Freegle Wiki). This immediately sets free online reuse apart from many other ways of exchanging goods. First, the absence of money distinguishes it not only from formal retail, but also from much second-hand economic activity. Second, the one-way nature of the transaction – the explicit instruction that 'there are no strings attached' (Freecycle FAQ) – stands in contrast to gift-giving between family and friends, within an

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[5] The rules and guidelines discussed here are taken from two sources, the Freegle Volunteer Wiki (http://wiki.ilovefreegle.org) and Freecycle FAQ (http://wiki.freecycle.org/). I indicate in the text where each of these sources is drawn on.

ongoing cycle of reciprocity and obligation, deeply bound up in the maintenance of those relationships (Guillard and Del Bucchia, 2012).

Online reuse also entails competences in the narrower sense: skills, abilities and know-how. These arise in response to, and as a complement of, the objects, technologies and rules discussed above. Realising the dormant usefulness of things often presupposes a creative eye and the manual skills to fix up or re-purpose (Strasser, 1999). And just as forums and mailing lists require Internet access, they also rely upon users' computer literacy and familiarity with the conventions of online communication.

Moreover, changing the rules of exchange – eliminating financial value as a legitimate indicator of an object's worth – requires new ways of deciding who gets what. The giver is responsible for choosing between numerous potential recipients. Unlike an online auction, where an item goes quite literally to the highest bidder, here the connection between ability to pay and acquisition is removed. The giver is forced to find other criteria for choosing.

Meanings: waste, community and the gift

One further set of elements – a practice's 'symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations' (Shove et al, 2012:14) – are perhaps the most difficult to apprehend, being largely intangible. In this regard I attempt to glean the 'social and symbolic significance of participation' (p.23) underlying online reuse from the explicit statements each organisation makes about its aims or goals.

Freecycle's stated mission is 'to build a worldwide gifting movement that reduces waste, saves precious resources and eases the burden on our landfills while enabling our members to

benefit from the strength of a larger community' (Freecycle FAQ). Three notions are particularly pertinent here: waste, community and gifting. First, waste generation levels are identified as problematic, as leading to environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources. Similarly, Freegle's published aims, two of which are to 'promote the keeping of usable items out of landfill' and to 'promote sustainable waste management practices' (Freegle Wiki), reflect interrelated concerns with waste and sustainability, while drawing attention to another problematic aspect of waste: that 'usable items' are going unused. If, as we saw earlier, waste is a matter of sorting (Strasser, 1999; Douglas, 2002; Kennedy, 2007), then reuse is about reclassifying: reclaiming value that was temporarily hidden, forgotten or inaccessible. It acknowledges value as socially constructed, as contextually contingent, and not only that one person's rubbish is another's treasure, but that things have biographies, moving in and out of states of being valued (Appadurai, 1986; O'Brien, 1999; Gidwani, 2012).

Second, Freecycle aims to help its members 'benefit from the strength of a larger community'. And third, closely related, is its commitment to promoting a 'gifting movement': 'By giving freely with no strings attached, members of The Freecycle Network help instill a sense of generosity of spirit as they strengthen local community ties' (Freecycle FAQ). Of interest here is what might be meant by the term 'community', a notoriously difficult concept to pin down, but one that invariably 'feels good', at least in its imagined form, if not in its outworking (Bauman, 2001b: 1). At first sight the interactions (directly) facilitated by online reuse networks bear little resemblance to the ideal-typical *Gemeinschaft* (Tönnies, 1963 [1887]) rooted in tacitly shared understandings, homogeneity and enduring kinship-type relations. Instead they tend towards formality, relative anonymity, and the accomplishment of utilitarian ends, closer to Tönnies' notion of *Gesellschaft*, Granovetter's (1973) weak ties, or

Wellman and Leighton's (1979) 'liberated' communities. Online reuse, according to Freecycle's mission statement, is explicitly about increasing the number of people with whom one can potentially exchange resources.

Alternatively to a focus on the nature of social ties, Cohen (1985) foregrounds the symbolic dimension of community, whereby 'the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups' (p.12). While interactions between members of Freecycle and Freegle are typically brief and functional, these members are, at least in some cases, attracted by shared meanings: aversion to waste; 'generosity of spirit'; even the idea of (lost) community itself. In this respect, participants resemble an 'imagined community': one whose members 'will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 2006: 6). Their ongoing connection is with the local reuse group as a whole, rather than with any particular member. If it is an imagined community, however, then it is one sustained only through repeated yet discrete, concrete, face-to-face interactions between people. This brings us to another way of thinking about community: in terms of the social capital that holds it together, encompassing 'social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam, 2000: 19).[6] Intriguingly, whereas reciprocal obligation has traditionally been associated with building and maintaining solidarity (Komter, 2005), in Freecycle it is giving 'with no strings attached' that is explicitly equated with 'strengthen[ing] local community ties' (Freecycle FAQ). Online reuse networks are predicated on a generalised understanding of reciprocity; again, members identify with the group itself, as opposed to

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[6] Note that Putnam's usage differs from Bourdieu's narrower definition of social capital as the 'actual or potential resources which are linked to … membership in a group' (1986: 248). While Putnam sees social capital as a cohesive force, for Bourdieu it is a socially constructed and unequally distributed resource to be mobilised by individuals as they try to protect or improve their position within a given field.

with specific others within it, and it is this identification that sustains their future involvement (Willer et al, 2012).

Freegle's aims say little about growing community per se, but they do reveal a commitment to building grassroots responses to waste, seeking to 'promote and support local community groups working in the area of reuse', and to 'empower and support volunteers' (Freegle Wiki). This raises one further notion of community, especially relevant to informal, extra-monetary economies. Community is defined here not primarily by a type of social relation, a shared identity or understanding – although these remain important – but by an opposition: 'community' refers to social, economic or political spaces that are in some way *other* to the market and the state. Notwithstanding significant conceptual and ideological differences between these perspectives, it is the 'community' of New Labour's third way and the third sector (Levitas, 2000), of community governance (Bowles and Gintis, 2002), community self-help (Burns et al, 2004), and community economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

Elementary interdependencies

Temporarily considering different elements in isolation highlights just how closely they are connected: they are interdependent and evolve in response to one another (Shove et al, 2012). The use of Internet-based technologies, for example, requires specific skills. Rules and guidelines, as formalised *competences*, operationalise certain *meanings* – abstract ideas applied to particular practices – and in turn take on a *material* form when written down. And the story of Freecycle's emergence (Botsman and Rogers, 2010) can be told in terms of interdependent elements. It started with a material problem, that is, material defined as a problem, a conjunction of materials and meanings: good stuff going to landfill. Then a mechanism comprising competences, material infrastructures and technologies was set up to

deal with that problem. As the practice spread it evolved, spawning further technological

innovations, rules, guidelines, skills, different meanings and ideas, responding to variations in

performance, and in turn helping to shape future performances. It is to this experience, to the

varied doings of online reuse, that the discussion will now turn.

5. Findings (2): Free online reuse exchange 'in practice'

Having isolated what distinguishes free online reuse from other practices, I will now draw on

interview material to address the second and third research questions outlined above:

exploring what happens to performances of acquisition and disposal when distinctive

elements are introduced, and investigating internal differentiation within the practice of

online gifting. First, in considering 'what happens', I look at intended and unintended

consequences, what does and what doesn't change, with respect to two sets of interdependent

elements: (1) Internet-mediated communities, addressing a perceived need for greater

connectedness (meaning) through technology (material); and (2) moneyless economies,

embodying commitments to gifting and generosity (meaning) in the rule that items must be

given free of charge (competence). I will then turn to 'internal differentiation', concentrating

on how online reuse means something different to different people, or to the same people at

different times, or in relation to different material objects.

Internet-mediated communities? Connections and disconnects

In contrast to giving and receiving through family and friends, the online infrastructure

allows participants to connect with a wider group of people previously unknown to them.

Some understood this as addressing a more anonymous contemporary experience – the

classic urban problem as identified by successive generations of sociologists – or, as Ruth put

it, 'there's a lot of people out there who really don't know their neighbours'.

A minority shared first-hand stories about forming new relationships, but for most the interactions with fellow users were brief and functional. If online reuse networks can be considered communities, they bear closer resemblance to the weak, utilitarian ties of 'liberated' communities (Wellman and Leighton, 1979) than to the traditional *Gemeinschaft* (Tönnies, 1963 [1887]). As Paul commented, it might make more sense to think of these exchange mechanisms as a proxy for close-knit relationships, rather than as an opportunity to develop them:

> Freecycle is a useful system for plugging the gap that's formed because we don't have open
> discussions in the street about what your needs are ... But you can put an anonymous message up
> saying, you know, I need this, and I think that's easier for us. (Paul)

The ability to connect with a whole city facilitated the matching of diverse, and in some cases extremely niche, needs or tastes with a corresponding breadth of available things. Participants wouldn't necessarily know someone with a particular item to give away, or who needed a particular item; the online network increased the probability of being put in touch with the relevant people.

Communities are defined by their boundaries: by who is inside and who is outside (Cohen, 1985). While online reuse networks facilitated connections, participants also raised concerns about their capacity to exclude. Some were frustrated at repeatedly 'missing out' on items, lacking the time or facilities to regularly check new messages. Unequal access may reflect wider social inequalities, with divergent Internet use still structured by an unequal distribution of financial and cultural resources (White and Selwyn, 2013).

Another material barrier to access is the unavailability of appropriate transport, especially an issue for large items, or when the giver and recipient live in different parts of a city:

It's alright if you've got a car and you can go and pick them up. It's alright if you live in [a neighbourhood] where lots of things seem to be being swapped. But if you're trying to get something and you haven't got transport and you can't pick it up, or you live outside the central bit of [the city], it's really quite difficult. (Alice)

Living in the wrong area, or having limited access to particular material resources, restricts participation. Concerns were also raised with regard to a related form of competence: IT literacy and fluency in communicating online. The interface was widely seen as outdated and much less user-friendly than familiar social networking and online shopping experiences, reducing both its accessibility to the less 'tech-savvy' and its appeal to potential new users.

Both organisations have attempted to overcome barriers to participation, developing new customised interfaces, 'My Freecycle' and 'Freegle Direct', to simplify the user experience. Both Freecycle and Freegle have also attempted to mitigate the effects of unequal Internet access by recommending a fair offer policy. Users are encouraged 'to take a period of time to see what responses [they] get before deciding who to give item(s) to', thus giving 'those who don't have continual access to the Internet a fair chance to reply' (Freecycle FAQ). The fair offer policy provides evidence of free online reuse as an adaptive practice, responsive to unintended outcomes of its distinctive materiality (the online mechanism) and introducing further adaptations in competences (as formalised in written guidelines) to better conform to its meanings and purposes (widening participation in reuse, keeping more things out of landfill). In practice, however – in the doings – fair offering adds further complications, as we shall see below.

A moneyless economy

The issue of how goods are allocated – how givers choose between potential recipients – brings the discussion back to another key distinguishing feature of online gifting: the rule that

all items must be given free of charge. Removing money radically challenges the conventional relationship between the person getting rid of an item and its potential recipients, with the ability to pay no longer tied to the likelihood of successful acquisition.

Research participants described how they had personally benefited from this opportunity to get things for free, especially when financial means were diminished or when facing an increase in outgoings: relocation for work or study, separation from a partner, the arrival of a new child, a period of unemployment. In several cases this meant furnishing an entire house or flat with little money. One participant relayed how she had moved cities while going through divorce. At the time she was 'struggling financially, emotionally, mentally … struggling on every level'; setting up home without spending money was not only practically beneficial, but emotionally rewarding:

> I am very, very proud when people come into my house and I say I have furnished this house on
> Freecycle. (Sarah)

However, eliminating money also brings its own dilemmas. A new set of competences had to be learnt by givers and would-be recipients alike: how to decide who to give to, and how to maximise one's chances of being chosen. Furthermore, the fair offer policy discourages reliance on another commonplace rule for deciding who gets what: 'first come, first served'.

Participants gave differing examples of how they made this decision. A typical priority was to save time or reduce hassle. Some spoke of the practical advantages of careful deliberation, like guarding against a recurring problem of 'no shows'. Over time and through experience, participants felt better able to judge who was likely to turn up, for example noting the perceived effort put into wording a response to an offer post. Others, by contrast, again for reasons of convenience, felt unable to follow the fair offer policy, to take the time to consider the relative merits of potential recipients, and so gave the item to the first person who emailed.

This approach was especially popular when givers 'just want something gone' as quickly as possible. In many cases approaches were combined:

> I really did not have the time so I would rather just give it away to the first person, or of course if I received three or four replies to my post in the same day, of course I would choose probably the nicest one, or the one I thought was more in need of that object. (Gabriella)

Beyond convenience, these two attributes – niceness and need – kept on recurring as reasons for choosing a recipient. Typically the person chosen might be perceived to be the most polite, the one with whom the giver most closely identified, the one most able to articulate their need for the item or how they intended to make use of it.

From the other side, as a recipient, Sarah felt that she was more likely to be given an item if she outlined her material circumstances – 'if I email someone and say I'm a single mum on benefits' – although she was wary of presenting a 'sob story'. Two of her examples underline the role of learning and practical experience in becoming a skilled giver and recipient:

> There's one woman who … specifies that if you email her asking for it and you don't put a story then you won't get it. … Presumably because she's experienced, she's used to getting a lot of responses so it kind of helps her decide.
> You learn as you use it … half of it is [making] your case, you know, like saying I'm a single mum – blah blah blah – but also half of it is people want to know what you're going to use it for, who your family are … And if they can kind of picture you and get your story then that gives them satisfaction. Especially if it's something that has been in the family and used by two sets of children and really, really enjoyed, and has happy memories. (Sarah)

This latter quote highlights how Freecycle and Freegle, freed from the constraints associated with the ability to pay or 'first come, first served', can facilitate 'care-full' transactions not unlike handing down treasured things to friends or relatives (Gregson et al, 2007b). However, these different ways of choosing 'who gets what' throw up further unintended consequences. Some participants were not comfortable with judging, and being judged by, fellow group

members. Choosing recipients by their perceived politeness, writing skills or shared circumstances depends on their possession of particular forms of cultural capital,[7] leading to potential bias by social class, nationality or ethnicity:

> It's almost like when people put things on it they're judging the responses. So if they get a response from someone who perhaps isn't very good at English, they won't reply to that person, because they haven't been very polite. (Alice)

Trying to choose the most 'needy' recipient is equally problematic. Some were reluctant to base such a decision on a single short message. Even if a worthy recipient can be 'correctly' identified, it is questionable that users feel compelled to make themselves vulnerable, offering up their personal stories to a (comparatively) powerful arbiter for judgement, or that a patronising, paternalistic relationship is created between giver and receiver, recast as benefactor and deserving poor.

Despite the formal absence of money, performances of free online reuse can contribute to the reproduction of existing market-mediated inequalities and power relations. Moreover, monetary value itself continues to have an influence, albeit indirectly. Certain financially valuable items were more sought after, reflecting their prestige or association with quality – 'you know, brand new from John Lewis; that sounds great' (Sarah) – or the amount recipients could save by not having to buy them. This, in turn, made acquisition more competitive, further reinforcing the pressure on givers to choose the 'right' recipient.

Meanings and their objects

This section has so far served to highlight some intended and unintended consequences of online gifting: where participants' experiences conform to and deviate from expectations,

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[7] As a counterpart to economic and social capital, cultural capital refers to the 'embodied', 'objectified' or 'institutionalised' cultural resources valued (or otherwise) in a given social setting. Examples range from physical and mental dispositions, ways of speaking or walking, via artefacts such as books and paintings, to educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986).

reproducing and challenging what is recognisable as the practice-as-entity. I have begun to illuminate performances that are noticeably distinctive, yet remain clearly identifiable as the doings and sayings of free online reuse. I will now further explore this internal variation by turning to the different meanings of reuse: to different people, at different times, in relation to different objects.

First, participants cited numerous purposes or motivations, at times differing from Freecycle and Freegle's stated aims and ethos (cf. Nelson et al, 2007; Arsel and Dobscha, 2011). Discourses around waste and its environmental consequences were, unsurprisingly, almost ever-present. 95 per cent of survey respondents used Freecycle or Freegle to 'cut down on waste', while 84 per cent cited 'conserving the planet's resources' as a motivation. Similarly, interview participants frequently described landfill, resource depletion and climate change as direct or indirect outcomes of wasteful consumption practices, expressing a desire to reduce their contribution to these issues.

Some expressed strong commitment to the gift economy model, aside from their own direct benefit as recipients. Several participants referred to the principle of 'paying it forward', a form of generalised reciprocity (Sahlins, 2004; Nelson and Rademacher, 2009; Willer et al, 2012), where gifts are given without any expectation of a direct return. For example:

> …you might not be in a position to give me anything right now, or you might never be in a
> position to give something to me, but you might be really good at being a friend for the guy down
> the road. (Paul)

Alongside these other-oriented purposes, many users were primarily trying to fulfil a more mundane goal: getting something they needed or wanted, or getting rid of something they no longer had use for. Financial and practical considerations such as affordability and convenience were at least as prominent as what could be termed ethical engagements. As

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Sarah put it, before going on to detail her well-reasoned objections to overconsumption and waste, 'I would say first and foremost it is about getting stuff for free'. And with regard to the convenience of giving things away: 'They can come and collect the stuff, we get rid of the stuff, everybody's happy. It was really just the easiest way to do it' (Gabriella). Crucial here is the need to look beyond primary motivations and consider the multiple, complementary and contradictory meanings with which practices are imbued. For many participants, online reuse networks simultaneously meant a source of free stuff and a way of consuming ethically. They were, at once, a convenient disposal mechanism, a way of reducing waste and of giving generously.

Second, research participants highlighted how their use of Freecycle and Freegle meant something different at different times. As shown above, particular transition periods tended to foreground online reuse as a means of acquiring free stuff. At other times, when in a more secure position or moving on again, the same participants saw Freecycle or Freegle as a means to give things away, to 'pay forward' the generosity they had been shown, or as a convenient way to clear a home.

Third, different objects, and participants' relationships with them, carried different meanings, resulting in quite varied performances. Certain items were more sought after than others, reflecting their market value, but also their anticipated quality, durability or scarcity. Different engagements with objects can be illustrated especially well in relation to how people allocated the giving of goods. Items one had an emotional attachment to or that had some history, or those seen as having more value, were carefully directed to 'good homes'. As we saw earlier, this might reflect identification with a recipient, with their demonstration of need or description of how they will use an object. For items regarded with little emotional

attachment, online gifting was more commonly a convenient way to get rid of something unwanted, a burden taking up space, without the trouble of driving to the tip. In such cases, givers were quite happy to settle on the first person to come along. These items might be seen as 'junk', no longer valued by the giver, but a process of letting go might also have already taken place:

> I've come to the decision that I can accept that this stuff can now go, so I want it gone before I change my mind. And also it's like once you view the stuff differently, it's not personal, it hasn't got an attachment. It's then rubbish. (Sarah)

Again, Strasser's (1999) notion of waste as a matter of sorting is brought to mind. Relatedly, Freecycle and Freegle were often part of a suite of different 'conduits' for acquiring or disposing of goods (Gregson et al, 2007a). While charity shops, for example, were seen as a good source of cheap, second-hand clothes and a good place to donate them, many of them will not stock larger items of furniture, or electrical items. Freecycle was initially set up to fill this gap and it continues to do so. These conduits were, furthermore, related hierarchically. When looking for specific items, Freecycle or Freegle was a starting point before deciding to spend money elsewhere. Similarly, Gabriella spoke of selling items on eBay. This was understood as 'feeling stupid' for having spent money on something unwanted, and subsequently trying to recoup the costs, rather than a strict financial decision. In a parallel situation, when clearing a house of things a previous tenant had left behind, she 'had absolutely no intention of making any money out of it'. Other participants described attempts to give items away in more informal ways before settling on online means:

> Some of the stuff I give away, I give to friends and family; other things I put on Freegle. It's very much in that order. (Ruth)

Finally, the variety of meaningful objects – material-semiotic interdependencies – exchanged, the different performances they entail and the positioning of these mechanisms in relation to other conduits are of particular relevance for my fourth research question: how online reuse is

not only internally differentiated, but also overlaps with various other practices. On the one hand, getting rid of items evoking little emotional attachment via Freecycle or Freegle – the 'rubbish' identified by Sarah – is understood as a more convenient alternative to, and demonstrates considerable overlap of meaning with, driving junk to the tip. It would seem reasonable, then, to consider performances within this subset of online reuse *simultaneously* as examples of another practice called, say, 'waste disposal'. By contrast, 'care-fully' choosing the recipient of a much-treasured possession shares meanings with giving hand-me-downs to family and friends, with Freecycle/Freegle merely extending the network of potential people to give to. Performances within this subset of online gifting could also be seen as an engagement in 'donating' practices, or similar.

6. Discussion and conclusions

I set out in this article to discover what it is that people are doing when they give and receive goods free of charge via online reuse networks. More specifically, I aimed to define and delimit free online reuse as a practice – isolating its constituent meanings, competences, material elements (Shove et al, 2012) and the interactions between them – and to (metaphorically) map both its boundaries and points of overlap with other types of acquisition and disposal. The key distinguishing features, perhaps unsurprisingly, were found to be: an online infrastructure, its associated technologies and competences; the rule that exchanges must be one-way, with 'no strings attached'; and overarching symbolic associations with reducing waste, building community, and the gift.

Defining a practice already pared down to 'free online reuse' would always involve a degree of tautology. However, the abstracting process, facilitated by an 'elementary' approach to conceptualising practices, enabled not only establishment of the practice's parameters, but

also a route to considering, via qualitative interview material, the impact of these distinctive, interdependent elements on how people acquire and dispose of things. Emerging insights relate both to the nature of online reuse and to methodological and conceptual issues pertaining to the practice-based approach.

Set against a perceived crisis of solidarity or connectivity in contemporary, (post-)industrial cities (e.g. Putnam, 2000; Bauman, 2001a; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), Freecycle and Freegle position themselves as strengthening a form of community, one unlike the traditional *Gemeinschaft* of pre-modern rural life (Tönnies, 1963 [1887]). Instead it is a form of association characterised by weak ties, sustained through repeated one-off interactions, yet also held together by shared meanings and a generalised form of reciprocity, bearing some resemblance to both Wellman and Leighton's (1979) 'liberated' communities and Anderson's (2006) 'imagined' community. In practice, the online mechanism was seen by interview participants as facilitating useful connections for the exchange of resources, but also as excluding certain others from making these connections, due to their comparative lack of access to technologies, or fluency in their use.

A similar ambivalence surrounded the notion of online reuse exchange as a moneyless economy. The absence of money was celebrated by both those benefiting from free things and those deriving satisfaction from helping others in need. Giving for free also provided a way of passing on items considered no longer sufficiently valuable in financial terms to make attempted sale worthwhile, yet not deemed ready to be thrown away. However, removing the ability to pay as a way of determining who gets what left a vacuum to be filled: how else would this decision be made? Goods might be allocated on a first come, first served basis, potentially excluding those without constant access to online communication means or

transport, disproportionately those with fewer economic and cultural resources (White and Selwyn, 2013). Alternatively they might be given to the most 'polite' respondent, or the one with whom the giver most easily identifies, privileging certain valued forms of cultural capital, ultimately closely linked to the possession of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In either case there was evidence that, although in some ways challenging inequalities and power relations associated with capitalist market exchange, non-monetary transactions can also serve to reproduce them.

A further observation was that free online reuse meant different things to different people, in different circumstances or in relation to different objects. Different meanings corresponded to different kinds of performances. As Schatzki (2002: 87) observes, a given performance, or a given element, may simultaneously belong to any number of different practices-as-entities, causing overlap between those practices. My interviews suggest that some acts of online reuse might simultaneously be enactments of other practices, for example 'waste disposal' or 'donating', depending on the value assigned to the objects in question.

Taken together, these findings raise several important questions for the further study of social practices in general and, more specifically, alternative consumption practices. First, there remains a need for contemporary practice-based approaches to better accommodate, or at least sit more comfortably alongside, ways of theorising power and inequalities (Shove and Spurling, 2013; Walker, 2013). This would imply a conception of unequally distributed resources, carried by individuals, but shaped by and only realisable in the 'doing' of particular practices. One response might be to delve into the insights of practice theories past, such as that of Bourdieu. Through the lens of economic, cultural and social capital, each only valued according to the logic of specific fields of practice (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), online

reuse networks could be interpreted as mechanisms that reduce the need for forms of economic and social capital valorised in other consumption practices (money, or knowing the right people), but increase the need for certain types of cultural capital (computer skills, 'politeness').

Second, reinvigorated objects diverted from the waste stream cannot help but draw attention to value and its contingency on social, temporal and spatial context, as well as on the circumstances of those assigning it (Strasser, 1999; O'Brien, 1999; Gidwani, 2012). Key to research participants' own accounts were: negotiations of differently valued materials; valuations that change over time or vary from one person to another; careful selection between different 'conduits' for acquiring and disposing of different types of things; and the interplay of competing or complementary, more or less commensurable forms of value and values (financial, practical, ethical, aesthetic, symbolic, etc.). A dilemma in writing about these experiences within a practice-theoretical framework is how to avoid reverting to one of a number of 'rational choice' perspectives, with an isolated agent processing and confronting an external world, for instance the aforementioned 'ABC model' (Shove, 2010), where individually held values are assumed to determine individual behaviour. This dilemma raises the question of whether some quite different, more 'entangled' or 'distributed' notion of calculative/'qualculative' agency could be reconciled with a practice-oriented approach (Miller, 2002; 2008; Callon and Law, 2005; Stark, 2011).

Third, recognition of different practices as overlapping – sharing elements and performances – presents a potential contribution to the study of diverse economies, discursively disrupting the paralysing reification of capitalism as an all-powerful economic system, while studiously avoiding overly simplistic distinctions between market and non-market, formal and informal

activities (Williams, 2005; Gibson-Graham, 2006). That performances of online reuse mobilise elements of both 'capitalist' and 'non-capitalist' practices can be read fatalistically: even the simplest of attempts at creating moneyless exchange mechanisms are doomed to failure in a hopelessly commodified world. Alternatively it is a finding full of possibility: what if many other, similar performances of consumption are already dependent on 'non-capitalist' as well as 'capitalist' meanings, competences and materials? Coupled with an understanding that it is in both diversity of performances and the migration of elements from one practice to another that established patterns of doing are reconfigured (Shove and Pantzar, 2005; 2007), insights from practice-based approaches offer one way of theorising how social change, big or small, takes place, adding a few more cracks (Holloway, 2010) in the apparent edifice of socially unjust and environmentally unsustainable capitalism.

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