

Peer-to-Peer Accommodation Networks: Pushing the boundaries

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Networks and Hosts – a Love-Hate Relationship

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This chapter explores the love-hate relationship of some hosts with Airbnb. The Airbnb Host Forum in Tasmania (Australia) serves as the case study. The hosts who participate in this forum are passionate about their involvement on Airbnb, and advocate for it and its deregulation in their home state. But their passion goes well beyond vocally advocating for peer-to-peer accommodation networks. Like tiger salamanders, these hosts will turn on the facilitators of the online platform and attack them just as quickly as they will support them. This chapter explores this love-hate relationship and asks why hosts bite the hand that feeds them.

'I love AirBnB' (Lok, 2017)

'Omg i hate airbnb' (Natalie, 2016)

Peer-to-peer accommodation networks would not exist without facilitators of online platforms such as Airbnb. A large number of facilitators have tried to establish peer-to-peer accommodation networks, but Airbnb has claimed market leadership in most countries, with the exception of China (Chapter 13). The success of Airbnb is due to a range of unique features its platform offers, which distinguishes it from those of its competitors (Chapter 1). Among these unique features are support communities or support forums which are hosted on the Airbnb webpage and enable hosts to meet, share their experiences, and help one another. Forums are designed around specific topics, such as

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improving the guest experience; dealing with guests who are troublesome; introducing new products; and environmental sustainability.

In addition to these topic-centered forums, support communities have also been set up for hosts whose listings are in the same geographical region. Just like Apple's Support Communities, host forums were probably established to strengthen the host community while reducing the need for (costly) Airbnb staff to assist. The reliance on this mechanism is substantial. To date there is no publicly available Airbnb help desk phone number for hosts or guests to call if they have a problem. Forums have therefore become crucial for hosts being able to resolve issues and share information.

However, some forums have taken on a life of their own. This chapter follows the Tasmanian Airbnb Host Forum that was originally located on the Airbnb app and is now located on Facebook as a closed group. Our observations of this group have allowed us to witness both intense passion and support for Airbnb, as well as a 'rage against the machine' mentality playing out in reaction to some aspects of Airbnb management. The intensity of these emotions and cohesive strength of this online community – a neo-tribe in its own right (Chapter 20) – is evidenced by its continued existence despite significant disruptions.

Members of host forums

It is important to remember that not all Airbnb hosts join support forums. Rather, hosts who are members of host support forums represent a highly specialized group of hosts; they are particularly dedicated hosts who are frequently the *Ethicist* type as described in Chapter 15: hosting on peer-to-peer accommodation networks is a central activity in their lives, they manage their own listings and typically interact with guests. Consequently, for these hosts, the Facebook forum provides a safe and relatively non-public environment where they can read, share information or coalesce as group when they perceive advocacy to be required. Many forum members have hosted accommodation on peer-to-peer networks for a long time, and are the pioneers of Airbnb in Australia. The presence of long-term hosts on forums has allowed these individuals to assume leadership roles, acting as administrators and advocates for Airbnb; leaders of resistance to change; and advocates for a return to what they regarded as the original, more accessible Airbnb.

The high level of emotions that hosts on support forums display in their discussions aligns with previous research findings that early adopters often feel strong emotions in the use of innovations (Wood and Moreau, 2006). Within these forums, it is important to note that not all members are highly vocal and passionate early adopters. Some members assume the role of listen-

ers (Crawford, 2009). These are forum members who read the posts and pay attention to the content, but do not comment on posts and do not have a public presence. Our research used a combination of netnography – observing and recording forums posts (Kozinets, 2002) – and in-depth interviews of hosts to elicit the reasoning behind their intense love and hate of Airbnb.

Love

The positive emotions hosts feel towards Airbnb is often strong and stems from many years of involvement in hosting on peer-to-peer accommodation networks. To some hosts, Airbnb now represents a key activity in their lives; their love is not just the result of Airbnb providing additional income which allows hosts to pay bills and take holidays themselves. For many, Airbnb has become a vocation and passion that provides a means through which they can meet people:

I live by myself... I love meeting interesting people, the pocket money, love using it when I travel to stay in wonderfully rich and different and local places.

Gaining perspective from another individual from a different walk of life is insightful. You get to realize how different, yet how similar everyone is. Airbnb is helping create friendships that would have never existed, and very few social platforms allow you to create a personal and meaningful connection with someone who lives 10,000 miles away.

For other hosts, whose motivations may be more entrepreneurial, their love of the platform is driven primarily by financial reasons:

I love the income. I have bought a second investment property as my superannuation so I love Airbnb because it gives my family an extra income stream.

These differing reasons for their love of the platform are explored as motivations for hosting in Chapter 15.

The Tasmanian Airbnb forum illustrates the role a group of hosts can play when advocating for the continued protection of peer-to-peer accommodation networks. During 2016, as the Tasmanian government debated the legalization and regulation of Airbnb, the host support group encouraged other members to rally together and oppose regulation. During this time, many posts updated members on debates in the media, alerted them to press releases and public meetings and called for assistance when needed.

Hi Hosts, so we are working intensively on getting submission lodged...and any help counts.

This advocacy was supported by Airbnb – which actively encouraged network members to lobby for favorable legislation (O’Regan and Choe, 2017) – and ultimately resulted in the government shifting the Tasmanian draft policy from limiting Airbnb hosts to rent out the properties for more than 42 days to a more generous policy, which required only properties with more than four rooms in the hosts house and listings which were not the hosts primary residence to be accredited (see Chapter 11 for details).

Through this forum, hosts have also advocated for the acceptance of Airbnb as an integral part of the mainstream tourism industry. In early 2017, the group lobbied Tourism Tasmania for an increased presence on the state government’s marketing website. This process was successful and resulted in Airbnb hosts being allowed to list their accommodation on traditional tourism websites, such as Discover Tasmania:

Ok as they say in the vernacular here: total result from Discover Tasmania .we can now list!!

In addition to acting as an advocacy group, the forum can also take the role of a protector of Airbnb, particularly when threatened by other network facilitators. It is not uncommon for discussions to emerge over the relative merits and pitfalls of competing online booking platforms which facilitate peer-to-peer hosting, such as Stayz, and Booking.com. But almost without fail, there is evidence of a strong allegiance to Airbnb.

I only use Airbnb as I do it in line with its initial intentions as a sharing platform – not as an accommodation business.

The forum also acts as a watchdog for the business performance of Airbnb in Tasmania. Occupancy is a common topic of conversation. Often around Christmas or Easter, hosts will compare their occupancy rates across regions. Members who have positioned themselves as spokespeople for the group often ask for updates on occupancy, either out of interest or to pass onto media.

Hi Folks. Urgent feedback required please. ABC Journo has called asking how Airbnb is going during Dark Mofo, essentially are we full?... I said I’d get back to her having ‘taken the pulse’ of your feedback. Thanks, guys.

The strong emotional connection hosts feel with the Airbnb brand are evident, particularly amongst the pioneer Airbnb hosts who originally met online when the forum was located on the Airbnb app. These strong connections are likely to be the result of a deliberate campaign by Airbnb to actively foster

brand connection, because fostering of brand connection via support communities has proven to be an exceptionally successful strategy used by large companies such as Apple and Microsoft.

The subsequent migration of the forum members to Facebook in defiance of the changes made to forums by Airbnb in 2015 was most certainly not a development Airbnb would have actively encouraged. Airbnb would most likely have preferred Tasmanian hosts to interact with one another using the Airbnb-managed website. Yet the fact that Airbnb hosts have continued to interact, support each other, share experiences, and lobby to protect interests of Airbnb is a sign of a very strong community or neo-tribe (Chapter 20), as are the high levels of emotions that are displayed on the forum. Hosts on the Tasmanian Facebook Airbnb Forum love hosting, they love Airbnb, and they love being part of the forum.

However, the level of emotions is not only high at the positive end of the emotional spectrum. Emotions run just as high at the negative end: when hosts who feel that hosting on peer-to-peer accommodation networks is central to their life get upset about something, they get really upset, and their love can quickly turn into hate.

Hate

The Tasmanian Airbnb Host Facebook forum at the center of this chapter has developed into a hotbed of resistance. A 'rage against the machine' mentality regularly shines through posted comments. The genesis for this may have been reactions against two Airbnb initiatives: censorship and closing down an app.

Censorship

The first Airbnb initiative which prompted a reaction of defiance among hosts on the forum was automated censorship of forum content. On the original host forums which were accessible through the Airbnb app, hosts were prevented from sharing phone numbers, such as that of the Airbnb headquarters. To overcome this, hosts on the forum devised a system to bypass what they perceived as an increasingly impenetrable organization. For example, the phone number 6222 0049 would be described as 'Six Three number Twos, Zero and that again plus a four and nine'. Similarly, if forum members wanted to refer to social media platforms whose names were also censored, they would use codes to alert other members to their existence. Facebook, for example, would be referred to as 'the platform beginning with an F'. Once the Tasmanian group migrated to Facebook, automated censorship was no longer an issue. This was celebrated by the new group members:

... being frank in an Air BnB forum is going to be difficult since it would no doubt be content moderated – we can voice our opinions freely here without fear or favor.

Closing down forums on the app

The second act of defiance was in 2015 when Airbnb closed down all host forums on their app and moved them to a separate webpage. Hosts on the group we follow did not support this decision, perceiving it as an attempt by Airbnb to exclude their voices. In defiance of this move, they created a closed Facebook group for hosts in Tasmania. The independent platform enabled hosts to continue their discussion and relationships with fellow hosts.

Since migrating to a Facebook forum, rebellion has reignited for other reasons. Many pioneer hosts feel that Airbnb has become increasingly inaccessible. For these pioneer hosts, Airbnb is a community, a neo-tribe that they are part of (Chapter 20). This community, in their view, is made up of like-minded people. Hosts are just as important as the founders of Airbnb and all the paid staff at Airbnb. With Airbnb growing exponentially, the neo-tribe is expanding too fast for the founders or even staff to be able to play the role of peers to all hosts. Hosts on the Tasmanian Airbnb Host Forum are very upset about this; they feel Airbnb has lost its distinct identity which they were so much attracted to initially. And it is this very distinct identity which drives many hosts – not only those who are members of forums – to make available space to strangers. Hosts we talked to commented that most of the things they hate about Airbnb relate to how Airbnb has changed over the years.

I am concerned about the scale they are now reaching, and the reduced level of attention/personal support that the Host community now seems to receive from the company.

Moreover, many long-term hosts do not feel the love from Airbnb, instead feeling that their efforts of offering unique tourism experiences are not appreciated and not recognized:

There seems to be little recognition of having been longtime host ... the floodgates have opened and there are pretty shonky operators out there now, many properties managed by agents etc, ...[it is] becoming something it was never intended to be (i.e.it started as rooms in a person house, with the person there - but now seems to be holiday apartment letting).

A common theme on the host forum is that of returning to the origins of Airbnb when founders, hosts and guests were a tight-knit community. This is a sentiment Airbnb may have acted upon when announcing the development of

more than 1000 host clubs around the world by the end of 2018 (Airbnb, 2017). Host clubs are led by hosts for hosts and allow the local host community or local Airbnb neo-tribe (see Chapter 20) to physically connect to one another. The introduction of clubs is welcomed by members of the host forum, who view it as an opportunity to revise some of the aspects of hosting on Airbnb which they used to enjoy so very much:

The latest announcement from Airbnb re Host Clubs and their new commitment to hosts in general. Very positive. They are trying to get back to where they listen to us.

The forum's reaction to this perceived decline in accessibility was to create pinned posts on the Facebook forum that share the direct contact details for Airbnb. Normally, if hosts have a problem with their listing or with a guest, they cannot simply call Airbnb. Rather, they must either direct message Airbnb via Twitter or use the Help Centre on the Airbnb app that directs the user to FAQs and encourages them to take action that does not involve direct contact with Airbnb.

Another topic that is regularly discussed on the forum is that of the Airbnb market being saturated. Forum members with a long history of hosting on Airbnb often discuss declining occupancy as more and more Tasmanians use or invest in space for Airbnb.

Saturation...mentioned in a post today... you bet! It has literally died... like a switch being turned off. Oh well it was good whilst it lasted. I wonder how Airbnb will react to this.

The issues that draw the most emotive responses, however, are changes made by Airbnb to their platform. Airbnb regularly adapts aspects of its platform, as well as offering new support services to hosts. These can include price tips or individualized alerts to hosts, letting them know that they could attract more bookings if they would reduce the price or make the space available for shorter bookings. These services are communicated to hosts via email. Hosts on the forum generally do not perceive these tips as helpful. Rather, they view them as attempts by Airbnb to control them and reduce their power:

So here's the thing: with zero new bookings on the horizon I tried the price tips (not sure if it is the smart pricing setting my floor price so that it wouldn't be silly as their suggested pricing is) and lo and behold I got an 8 day booking in March, which gave them my weekly price anyway. Coincidence? I think not my fellow landladies/landlords.

Interestingly, host support services even elicit emotions among hosts who do not have as high an emotional attachment to their peer-to-peer accom-

modation network. A common reason for resisting the Airbnb suggestion is that hosts have made a conscious and reasoned decision for setting their own price and minimum booking nights, so the offers of support by Airbnb are regarded as a nuisance and spam. Many hosts – especially those who have a strong attachment to the space they are making available for rent – like to be in the positions to choose the guest that will be staying at their place and know exactly which booking characteristics they need to look out for to protect their property (Karlsson et al., 2017). They do not like to hand over control to automated systems on the peer-to-peer accommodation network platform.

Glitches also prompt highly emotive responses, particularly when they cause process failure. In one case, the automatic function on the Airbnb app that prevents same-day bookings failed, meaning that hosts had to accept instant bookings with as little as two hours' notice. This caused considerable angst amongst hosts, who aired their frustrations on the forum.

Such posts are often followed by other hosts on the forum offering suggestions on how the problem could be addressed. Occasionally, however, frustrations escalate and hosts attempt to draw in Airbnb employees to voice their concerns, by tagging them in posts. In most cases, tagging Airbnb staff does not result in a direct response from the Airbnb staff member, further fueling the rage against the machine.

The seeds of hosts' love and hate for Airbnb in Tasmania

Tasmania is a small island with a population of only 519,000 and is widely known to be a very tight-knit community (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). In recent years, tourism has grown rapidly in the state, and it is now a major tourist destination, welcoming 1.26 million visitors each year (Tourism Tasmania, 2017). Tasmania's popularity as a tourist destination has led to considerable accommodation shortages in recent times; much like the situation experienced in Slovenia (Chapter 9). Airbnb has played a significant role in alleviating these shortages, explaining its rapid growth in Tasmania. Since its genesis in 2008, Airbnb has grown to having 777 listings managed by 564 hosts in 2017. The rapid growth has had positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, the possibility of listing underutilized space on Airbnb for short-term rental has created great opportunities for micro-entrepreneurship and employment (Chapters 7 and 14) which, in turn, has had a significant impact in a small regional state where unemployment is high.

For established commercial accommodation operators, the market entry of Airbnb represents a less positive development. These operators have to pay accreditation fees, insurance premiums, and comply with accommodation

regulations. The emergence of an unregulated platform that enables anyone to list space for short-term tourist accommodation continues to pose a significant threat to the hospitality sector. Much antagonism now exists between the traditional tourism industry and new businesses that have emerged by leveraging peer-to-peer accommodation networks such as Airbnb.

In addition to challenges to the tourism industry, the high demand for peer-to-peer accommodation has created difficulties for the long-term rental market in Tasmania, which has suffered a shortage of affordable accommodation in recent years, like many other locations around the world (Chapter 11). Airbnb has been accused of being the key reason for the shortage, triggering emotional discussions among the general public and in the media (Eccleston, 2017). As a consequence, regulations have been put in place in Tasmania which require council approval for listing stand-alone properties on Airbnb (Chapter 11).

As a result of this highly emotional and widely publicized debate, there is a certain amount of trepidation in declaring oneself as a host on a peer-to-peer accommodation network, with many reporting negative feedback from friends:

Every time I say I am doing Airbnb people say to me 'you and the rest of the world'.

The negative reaction from the general public further strengthens the connection and solidarity among hosts on the Tasmanian Airbnb Facebook host forum, and explains the strong emotions this neo-tribe experiences when matters relating to Airbnb are being discussed. It also explains the very negative feelings hosts on this forum have when they perceive Airbnb to not be supporting them. In their view, Airbnb would not work without their efforts, they have to defend themselves for hosting on Airbnb, and are perceived as part of the 'dark side' of the tourism industry; and consequently, they publicly defend and fight for Airbnb. Inevitably, they feel let down when Airbnb does not support them and emotions run high.

Love and hate by individual hosts

A very specific forum of Airbnb hosts stood at the center of this chapter. This last section looks beyond highly involved and engaged hosts and illustrates how emotions run high also among the general population of hosts. Most of the negative emotions expressed are related to the perception that the peer-to-peer accommodation network has not treated the host fairly:

I am extraordinarily unhappy and feel unprotected and violated by Airbnb during my last few resolution calls. (Airbnbhell, 2017a)

The level of emotion perceived in such situations seems even higher when hosts feel that they have always done the right thing by the network and all its members. Maybe the most painful experience is when status signifiers, such as Superhost status, are being taken away (see Chapter 20 for the critical role of status signifiers in neo-tribes) as illustrated in the following quote:

I have been a quiet, law-abiding Airbnb host for quite a few years now. I have tolerated, after agreeing to an Instant Booking, being warned that I shouldn't say 'no' again (I only did once) and, if it happened again, I would be listed lower in the search results and potentially scrapped altogether. I have also quietly accepted being told with great fanfare that I was suddenly a Superhost complete with virtual badge and then told I was no longer a Superhost essentially because of one iffy review by a very difficult man who arrived very late, left very early, and hadn't read or realized that we were rurally located. (Airbnbhell, 2017b)

I'm an Airbnb host and I'm falling out of love with Airbnb. I'm an Airbnb host – a recently crowned 'Superhost' if you don't mind – and I have a relationship problem. After being smitten with Airbnb for years, I'm considering breaking up with the global travel behemoth. (Ham, 2017)

But hosts who are not organized in forums do not only express negative emotions about peer-to-peer accommodation networks. A lot of love exists also among individual hosts, as these quotes illustrate:

My love for Airbnb excites me to talk and share more about them. (Chandak, 2017)

My love for Airbnb began a few years ago when I began renting out my spare bedroom to a bevy of travelers hailing from Russia to Italy and beyond. We shared stories, laughs and talked travel. With the proceeds I had my own adventures, often staying in other Airbnbs. I loved that you could still trust people with your home, and vice versa. (Ham, 2017)

Not only do individual hosts feel similar emotions about peer-to-peer accommodation networks, they also engage in advocacy. Below is the introduction to a host essay on why Airbnb is so lovable:

I've recommended AirBnB to family, friends and travelers alike, but I still get questions from people who seem dubious of the whole concept, so today I thought I'd write about my experiences using AirBnB and why I love it as a host. (Chandak, 2017)

Conclusions

Peer-to-peer accommodation networks have opened the door to anyone in the world being able to make their spare room or holiday home available for short-term rental; this may include a spare room, a treehouse in the backyard or just a piece of land for tourists to put a tent on. This phenomenon has developed beyond the marginal to the mainstream. And with its rise, emotions have also risen: emotions by established commercial accommodation providers who feel let down by policy makers; emotions by residents who find themselves competing with tourists when looking for a long-term rental; emotions by the general public; and emotions by the pioneering peer-to-peer accommodation hosts who love hosting, yet struggle with the speed with which the nature of hosting is changing. Such emotions represent yet another area where peer-to-peer accommodation networks push the boundaries.

Questions for future research

Peer-to-peer accommodation network hosts forums have not been studied much to date, yet they offer deep insight into all aspects relating to hosting on such networks. Hosts on these forums are experts; they know their network inside out; they single-handedly manage their properties, and, as a consequence, know all the positives and all the negatives better than anyone else. They also know exactly how every little aspect of the network platform works and, therefore, represent a rich source of feedback for improvement. Future research should study more forums; investigate whether the nature of discussions among hosts on forums differs across geographical regions and across platforms hosting these, especially Airbnb-operated versus independent platforms. Another question is how small the community of these extremely involved hosts is, and whether – with commercial operators entering peer-to-peer accommodation networks at a rapid rate – these hosts may end up feeling so disenfranchised with their current networks that they may choose to de-list and instead make their space available for short-term rental with an alternative network that better reflects their values as a host; the values of what they remember as ‘the good old Airbnb’. If this happens, will large, successful peer-to-peer accommodation networks turn into one-stop online travel shops (Chapter 8), while other peer-to-peer network facilitators will fill the gap of an ‘idealistic’ neo-tribe which – while trading space for money – enjoys the social aspect and the fact that vacant space can be put to good use?

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