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Guillaume Barral

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Being an Airbnb host, becoming an entrepreneur? Empirical evidence from Lyon

Guillaume Barral

Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3

“...there is an evolution of the type of users on all platforms. Even the platforms which were built up to link peers to peers are repositioning on a larger intermediation role and welcome professionals too (to expand their service range)”¹.

This is the case of Airbnb, founded in 2008 to be a peer-to-peer accommodation platform. At first, there were no enterprises nor companies. It allowed people to rent out an underutilized space of their accommodation or an underutilized accommodation for a while. But since, hosts' representations have changed, and their practices have got more and more professional. Airbnb has reshaped socio-spatial relationships towards property, to such an extent that hosts has become more and more calculating. This system spurs people on marketing themselves, their accommodation(s) and their services to be more competitive... in short, to become micro-entrepreneurs (Stabrowski, 2017).

These micro-entrepreneurs, also called “*professionals*” because they earn their living off their accommodations (Ke, 2017; Li *et al.*, 2016; Stulberg, 2016), are made up of multi-listers. They represent 6% of hosts in New York in 2014 and control “*one in five unique units in New York City booked on Airbnb as private short-term rentals*” (Schneiderman, 2014, 10) or 10% in Paris where they control 30% of the short-term rentals' market². Their possessions are located in the main touristic areas, and therefore the most profitable ones: for example, in Paris, these rentals have exploded in the IVth and the VIth districts³. With the growing number of such listings in city centers, the Airbnb syndrome contributes to the dwindling number of flats for rent on local real estate markets and, therefore, to the rent increase (Samaan, 2015). To fight back, municipalities implemented laws and asked for studies to understand and control the development of the short-term rentals market.

In this context, I wanted to conduct research about hosts' professionalisation that could be of use to the Métropole de Lyon, which is trying to understand and “*limit the professionalisation of this activity and to allow everybody to rent out their accommodation for a while, in the original spirit of collaboration*”⁴. This academic study attempts to fill this gap by discussing multi-listers' practices in Lyon, a town where the multi-listers represent 8% of the hosts and control 19% of the short-term rentals' market in July 2017, according to the data extracted by Tom Slee on Airbnb⁵. Are they acting like entrepreneurs, professionals, managers, intermediaries...? According to what kind of indicators can they be called so: the number of short-term rentals they control, the income they earn, the time during which they rent out their

¹ Translated from the French by Guillaume Barral : « ...l'on assiste sur toutes les plateformes à une évolution du type d'utilisateurs. Même les plateformes qui s'étaient construites sur une mise en relation de particuliers à particuliers se repositionnent sur un rôle d'intermédiation plus large et accueillent également des professionnels (pour élargir leur gamme de services) » (Terrasse, 2016, 15).

² Source: https://www.lesechos.fr/19/02/2016/LesEchosWeekEnd/00019-012-ECWE_airbnb--quand-un-canape-cache-un-professionnel.htm (last checked: January 2018)

³ 3 Source: <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/310715/comment-airbnb-squatte-la-france?onglet=full> (last checked : December 2017)

⁴ Translated from the French by Guillaume Barral: « limiter la professionnalisation de l'activité tout en permettant à chacun de louer de manière occasionnelle son logement, dans l'esprit collaboratif originel de ces plateformes ». Source: <http://www.met.grandlyon.com/airbnb-co-de-nouvelles-regles-pour-un-developpement-maitrise-a-lyon/> (last checked: March 2018)

⁵ Source: <http://tomslee.net/airbnb-data-collection-get-the-data> (last checked : September 2017)

accommodations, their business strategy...? In which way do they contribute to the airbnbification of the city center of Lyon? Are they even the only ones to do it? Since Airbnb spurs each user on being competitive and calculating on this entire-marketplace (Ke, 2017), I consider that some of the hosts who rent out just one accommodation must follow similar strategies to those followed by multi-listers – at a different level at least. And yet, this phenomenon has received little attention. This is the reason why it is necessary to run a qualitative study on hosts' profiles in order to show that multi-listers are not the only ones “*reflecting the growing professionalisation of this sector of the sharing economy*” (Stabrowski, 2017, 333).

This project aims to qualify and criticize the statement defended by Airbnb that most hosts “*use their Airbnb income to help pay their mortgage or rent*”⁶ and to distinguish “*ordinary individuals that want to do collaborative economy from those, more professional, that are doing of it a well-established business*”⁷. To this end, I discuss the “*logiques d'action*”, as defined by Philippe Bernoux (Amblard *et al.*, 2005), which lead people to rent out an accommodation on Airbnb in Lyon. At last, I question the policy the Métropole de Lyon is due to implement as of February 1st 2018 in order to frame the Airbnb phenomenon and to help the Métropole face the transformations initiated by this platform on the real estate market.

My objective is not to obtain a representative sample of the Lyon hosts, but rather to understand their actual professionalization. This is the reason why it seemed appropriate to run in-person interviews. This pilot study analyses the motivations and characteristics of Airbnb hosts. In doing so, I investigate four key questions:

- Which indicators can we use to identify professional hosts?
- Who are the professional hosts in Lyon and how did they choose to do this work?
- In which way do they use their skills and their (social, cultural...) capitals to found a sustainable profit?
- To what extent do they differ from those of want to play a part in sharing economy, in the spirit and practices?

The interviews already conducted with owners and concierge companies as well as the exploratory exploitation of a database allow me to formulate the hypothesis that hosts in Lyon register on Airbnb out of opportunism, but that the platform drags them and trains them to intensify their practice and to earn more and more benefits from their accommodation(s).

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⁶ Source: <http://blog.airbnb.com/economic-impact-airbnb/> (last checked: October 2017)

⁷ Translated from the French by Guillaume Barral: « *les simples particuliers voulant faire de l'économie collaborative, de ceux, plus professionnels, qui en font un business bien rodé* » (Deligia, 2018, 58)

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