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RESEARCH ARTICLE

“IT OBLIGES YOU TO DO THINGS YOU NORMALLY WOULDN’T”: ORGANIZING AND CONSUMING PRIVATE LIFE IN THE AGE OF AIRBNB

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ABSTRACT: In what ways do everyday life and private spaces become productive elements for platform organizations? Referring to a research on Airbnb (a platform-based company and current leader at the global level in the online hospitality industry) recently conducted in a touristic north-eastern Italian province, this paper critically explores to what degree and how Airbnb pervades, changes and controls the Hosts’ domestic space and spare time. To do so, first we will concentrate on the elements that regulate the relationship between the user and the platform and on some of the processes and mechanisms implied by the platform architecture. Then, by describing the everyday practices of “house-management” enacted by the Hosts, we will highlight the invisible work involved in ‘performing the platform’. From this point of view, it is worth noticing how, although Airbnb does not aim to create a parallel labour market, it produces ‘platform workers’ anyway, in that it implies the active engagement of its users in concrete activities. Airbnb is thus a perfect case to look at the ways in which platform organizations engage users in forms of production previously unknown, turning private goods and time into productive elements.

KEYWORDS: Airbnb, platform organizations, platform work, invisible work, user production

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1. Introduction

In what ways do everyday life and private spaces become productive elements for platform organizations?

To answer this question, this paper focuses on Airbnb, a company that provides a website for people to list, find and rent lodgings. Since 2010, Airbnb has expanded rapidly in many European and Western cities. The company has gained a positive reputation as an emblematic case of the so-called sharing economy or collaborative economy, but it has also been strongly criticized for disrupting housing and local communities. Moreover, the platform enables people to become Hosts by listing and renting out their lodging on a global short-term rental market, which ensures a potentially higher yield than a residential long-term rental (Picascia et al. 2017). It also gives travellers the opportunity to book accommodation at often lower prices than those offered by the hotel industry.

Given that the company profits by managing users' transactions and applying a fee to them (rather than by owning and managing lodgings itself), it is critical for Airbnb to involve as many users as possible. At the same time, it is also crucial for the company to be able to deal with users' heterogeneity and unexpected or unwanted actions, thus setting constraints upon their likely future actions. Airbnb seems to establish a dispersed organization with an apparently flat hierarchy: Hosts have a certain degree of freedom in listing their space and organizing it autonomously, while Guests are able to search the listings and directly interact with the Host. Still, the company maintains its central role by managing payments, providing tools that enable communication between users, and gathering information about them. In fact, as in the case of many other platforms, most of the information/content on the site is produced by its users either as a result of their interaction (via users' feedback) or as a prerequisite to start the interaction itself (via profiles and listings).

Referring to a research on Airbnb Hosts recently conducted in Trento, a touristic north-eastern Italian province, this paper critically explores to what degree and how Airbnb pervades, changes and controls the Hosts' domestic space and spare time. The first stage involved accessing the platform, detecting data from the website, and focusing on the elements that regulate the relationship between the user and the platform and on some of the processes and mechanisms implied by the platform architecture¹. The second stage entailed the collection of 20 in-depth interviews with individuals who

¹ By 'platform architecture' we refer to the design elements and procedures inscribed in the platform's interface, which are visible by accessing the website or mobile phone app as a user.

were signed up as Airbnb Hosts (10 renting out their entire apartment and 10 renting a private room) in the selected province.

By describing the everyday practices of “house-management” enacted by the Hosts, we will highlight the invisible work (Star and Strauss 1999) involved in ‘performing the platform’. From this point of view, it is worth noticing how, although Airbnb does not aim to create a parallel labour market, it produces ‘platform workers’ anyway, in that it implies the active engagement of its users in concrete activities.

Airbnb is thus a perfect case to look at the ways in which platform organizations engage users in forms of production previously unknown, turning private goods and time into productive elements for both the company and the Hosts. As aptly noted by Hyysalo, Jensen and Oudshoorn (2016: 2), for contemporary organizations it is crucial to find strategies that not only involve users, but that also produce active users – to profit from users’ involvement and everyday life.

2. The debate on digital platforms: between emancipation, domination and new production of users

Recent decades have witnessed the diffusion and proliferation of organizations that enable activities like donating, bartering, sharing, renting, accessing or selling of goods, services and/or information coordinated through digital (or IT) platforms (Hamari et al. 2016). As noted by Sun et al. (2015: 9), generally and broadly speaking “an IT-platform is defined as comprised of a technological base on which complementary add-ons can interoperate, following standards and allowing for transactions amongst stakeholders, within the platform-centric eco system”. Airbnb, Uber, JustEat, Google, Facebook, Amazon, Linux, Wikipedia, TaskRabbit, BlaBlaCar, TripAdvisor and Instagram (to name some of the most popular) are all young organizations born and further developed thanks to the use of a digital platform as their main operating tool (in the form of a website and/or mobile device app). Digital platforms permit users to conceive and design new ways of offering goods and services, of managing and sharing information, working, collaborating and coordinating production processes. Platform-organizations, thus, can differ significantly, and the variety of their scopes or functioning principles has led to different categorizations (Codagnone and Martens, 2016, Srnicek, 2016; Van Dijck, 2013; Jin, 2015) and interpretative waves. In a first wave, digital platforms are connected to concepts such as “peer-to-peer”, “digital commons”, “online cooperation”, “liberation of work”, “crowdwork”, “crowdfunding”, “horizontality”, “democracy”, “innovation from below”, “post-capitalism” and, foremost, the “sharing economy”

(Benkler 2006; Botsman and Rogers 2010; Gillespie 2010; Sundararajan 2016). In practice, this can translate into the possibility to build up new networks and community identities unconnected with pre-existing ones (Parigi et al. 2013) to create new forms of platform mediated trust or reputation (Sutherland and Jarrahi 2018) and to encourage forms of access over ownership (Martin 2016). In other words, platforms are seen as helpful tools that contribute to the pursuit of ideas like freedom and free circulation of knowledge. One can say that the Internet itself was built on these values, which in the past had found their principal references in open software and “hacker ethics” (Himanen 2001). This first wave dates to the early days of Web 2.0, when the possibility of users interacting with the World Wide Web and going beyond the original designers’ project (by customizing online spaces, uploading content and sharing them in a network of peers) seemed to give concrete support to facilitating commons and commoning (Plantin et al. 2018). As Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018: 11) put it, it was as if “connectivity automatically leads to collectivity”.

More recently, a second wave has generated an alternative and more complex narrative about the phenomenon, assuming that ‘lean’ platforms (Srnicek 2016) try to build their identity upon an imaginary linked to the idea of community and “sharing”, but that in fact promote “pseudo-sharing” (Belk, 2014) while acting as capitalist players focused on profit maximization (Ossewaarde and Reijers 2017). In this sense, “the sharing economy isn’t about sharing at all” (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2015) and looks more like what has been defined as ‘neoliberalism on steroids’ (Murillo et al. 2017). In fact, this second wave also tries to emphasise that if the purest examples of commoning platforms are services such as Wikipedia and Linux (which exclusively consist of information exchanges), it is also true that “many forms of digital commoning are not purely informational but are entangled within an organizational network of concrete (non-digitalized) economic practices” (Ossewaarde and Reijers 2017: 612). The sharing of a car or an apartment (as offered through BlaBlaCar or Airbnb), as well as the delivery of food (by Foodora or Just Eat) and/or a taxi service (like Uber), are evidently linked to a set of heterogeneous practices, often ‘material’ (such as driving or riding) more than ‘digital’. This second wave thus concentrates on the conditions of those working behind the platform and the ways in which platforms profit from users’ labour (Jin 2015; Irani 2015; van Doorn 2016). Platforms are now associated with words such as “precariousness”, “fragmentation”, individualization”, “erosion of workers’ rights” and, most of all, “outsourcing” (Srnicek 2016; Arcidiacono, Gandini and Pais 2018). Even if many differences occur between them, Airbnb, Uber, Amazon Mechanical Turk, BlaBlaCar, Foodora, or Taskrabbit all share a form of operating “through a hyper-outsourced model, whereby workers are outsourced, fixed capital is outsourced,

maintenance costs are outsourced, and training is outsourced” (Srnicek 2016: 95). Through this outsourcing-based model, platform-organizations optimize labour’s flexibility and scalability, articulating a ‘workforce-as-a-service’ model (Starner 2015) and creating *ad hoc* (labour) marketplaces that stand apart from institutional rules and rights (van Doorn 2016).

In other words, if the first wave concentrated on the emancipatory and ‘horizontal’ aspects of digital platforms, framing them also and foremost as a useful tool to overcome some forms of inequality (such as information asymmetry or the economic costs entailed in accessing knowledge) the second wave highlights issues of power and value exploitation.

It can also be said that the debate around Airbnb mirrors these two waves. Since 2010, Airbnb has expanded rapidly throughout the world (but mainly in European and Western cities), representing first an emblematic case of the so-called sharing economy, but being subsequently recognized for disrupting housing and local communities. Horn and Merante (2017), for example, analysed how Airbnb affects the availability and price of long-term residential rentals in the Boston city area, finding that there are negative effects on availability (which decreases) as well as on the price (which increases) of rentals. Other scholars (Picascia et al. 2017; Gurran and Phibbs 2017) reach similar conclusions, underlining how in extreme cases Airbnb’s impact on the local economy and the real estate market leads to a displacement of the residential population². While some scholars have highlighted a dynamic of reciprocity between the platform’s users (Ikkala and Lampinen 2015), the most recent contributions have focused on the hidden dynamics that give life to the platform’s functioning.

Ladegaard (2018), for instance, develops the concept of “comfortable exotic” to underline how, while getting in touch with diversity constitutes one of the principal added values of the service offered by the platform, Hosts tend to accept bookings made by people who are to some extent similar to them (for example by qualification or spoken languages). Further, Cheng and Foley (2018) showed how having more information about potential Guests creates conditions for making discriminatory choices, while other research (Fradkin et al. 2015; Liang et al. 2017) highlights how the *gameification* of the service (objectified, for instance, in the ‘Superhost’ role, as well as in other design elements) manages to influence consumer’s purchase-choices and evaluations. Still, users’ decision are not only influenced by the public rating/feedback system, but also by pre-existing racial prejudices. These may lead to negative feedback towards

² Cities like San Francisco (‘homeland’ of Airbnb), New York, Berlin, Amsterdam, Paris, Barcelona and Tokyo have all adopted policies to regulate the short-term rental market, also leading to research (such as Dredge et al. 2016) that comparatively analyzes the impact of these policies.

members of specific ethnic groups, which consequently causes a decrease in the value of their offers or demands (Condliffe 2016). In this way, reviews and feedback set an “economy of regard” (Offer 2015), which contributes to pricing dynamics while amplifying “differences between the ‘haves’ (those with a solid reputation) and the ‘have-nots’ (those without a good reputation)” (Ossewaarde and Reijers 2017: 617). As is the case with other digital services, platform users have to constantly take care of their digital reputation. This can involve online as well as offline activities, for example answering messages and requests to maintain a high ‘response rate’ on the platform, offering a good service (e.g. a clean room, a fair price) or engaging in emotional labour (Hochschild 1983; Nemeret al. 2018) to gain good public reviews.

2.1 Digital platforms, new production of users and invisible work

In line with the idea that “lean” platforms (such as Airbnb – Srnicek 2016) – despite trying to build their identity upon an imaginary of “sharing” – act as capitalist players focused on profit maximization (Ossewaarde and Reijers 2017), in this article we consider digital platforms from a different perspective. The pertinent issue from a sociological point of view (still underdeveloped in the ongoing debate) is the relational and performative aspect of platforms, that is, how they “shape the performance of social acts instead of merely facilitating them” (Van Dijck 2013: 29). Thus, we concentrate on the practices the platform-organization enacts to build a relationship with users, and the ways in which users give shape to those practices and relationships.

Inspired by a Science and Technology Studies (STS) approach and by Actor-Network Theory (Callon 1984; Latour 2005), different from the general attitude of the current debate (e.g. Srnicek 2016), we start from the assumption that platforms are not merely intermediaries; instead, they themselves constitute a “set of relations that constantly needs to be performed” (Van Dijck 2013: 26). This will enable us to draw attention to users’ central role in giving stability to this set of relations and to notice how, not by chance, the platform-organization tends to internally incorporate users and relationships. The architecture of platforms entails a continuous relation, coordination and collaboration between a “programmable, stable core system” with low variability, and diverse “modular, variable complementary components” (Baldwin and Woodward 2009). If it is true that platforms are “centrally controlled and designed systems (often under corporate control)” (Platin et al. 2018: 9), it is also true that they are diffused systems (i.e. built on a modular architecture) and would remain ‘empty boxes’ if users did not continuously perform, refine and repair them. As noted by Hyysalo et al. (2017), the design of contemporary technologies is more and more oriented not only to the in-

volvement of users, but also to stimulate their activity and creativity, transforming them (together with their material and immaterial resources) into an integral part of the product/service itself.

Thus, the 'production of users' is not to be intended as a unidirectional process, since it also refers to production *by* users, who are allowed a significant margin of freedom in giving shape and substance to the products/services they interact with. In this sense, it is crucial to take the users into account (Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003) and to analyse the relationship that occurs between them, the platform and the other elements involved. The 'core system' of platforms can be enriched with new components thanks to the work carried out by its users. Sometimes this work is visible and clearly expressed in the platform itself (as in the cases of TaskRabbit, Uber or Amazon Mechanical Turk). In other cases, although platform members formally limit themselves to 'offer' something (a space, as in the case of Airbnb, or a lift, as in the case of BlaBlaCar), the work connected to such an offer is not necessarily equally visible. In accord with the famous concept of "invisible work" coined by Star and Strauss (1999), every organizational situation entails 'pieces' of activity that remain in the shadows, not receiving due attention. In fact, "what exactly counts as work" (Star and Strauss 1999: 12) varies greatly: some knowledge and skills are immediately recognized as formal work, while others are neglected or relegated to the background. One of the first examples Star and Strauss make to foster their argument is particularly apt to our discussion: domestic work:

"before the women's movement of the 1970s, much of the activity associated with cleaning houses, raising children, and entertaining families was often defined as an act of love, an expression of a natural role, or even just as a form of being (Kram-rae 1988). Feminist movements like the British "Wages for House-work" began a public campaign to define those activities as work – work with real economic value" (Star and Strauss 1999: 10).

Building on other telling examples (inspired by a variety of everyday activities which take place in organizations), Star and Strauss (1999) are able to define inductively the characteristics of invisible work:

1. work which takes place in 'hidden' organizational times and spaces;
2. work which is considered as routine or manual, but at the same time presupposes expert knowledge and ability to improvise;
3. work performed by 'transparent actors'(typically, cleaning personnel);
4. actions/interactions not mentioned in any job description, which nonetheless are crucial for the perpetuation and maintenance of collective work.

As we will see from the analysis, to focus on these particular types of activities, figures, times and spaces can be particularly fruitful in the case of platforms such as Airbnb (where, again, the concept of ‘work’ is formally absent) in order to highlight the ways in which members’ everyday lives are turned into a platform productive element.

3. Methodology and empirical context

The data we present are the result of an analysis of the Airbnb platform, together with 20 in-depth interviews held with individuals signed up as Airbnb Hosts in the city of Trento, Italy. A first research step involved accessing the platform, detecting data from the website, and focusing on the elements that regulate the relationship between the user and the platform and on some processes and mechanisms implied by the platform architecture.

The researcher who conducted the fieldwork was already a “participant observer” before the research had started, in the sense that he is an Airbnb Host (in a different city). We believe the Host identity of the researcher significantly contributed to accessing the field: being signed up as a Host since August 2015 and having built an online reputation through received feedback, the researcher was able to use his profile to contact potential interviewees directly through the platform’s chat function, requesting interviews instead of lodgings. In other words, the researcher appeared as a ‘reliable’ and ‘accountable’ person, triggering a reciprocal identification and legitimation between Hosts and interviewer, and creating a situation of complicity, which made it easier to approach details and delicate issues (like the Hosts’ earnings or the way they managed their fiscal responsibilities). Moreover, an insider knowledge of Airbnb jargon, as well as the procedures and ambiguities connected to the Host role, was very useful in carrying out the interviews.

To deeply investigate Hosts’ daily lives and practices we relied on the episodic interview technique (Flick 2000), asking interviewees to focus on specific episodes and concrete situations. The main criterion used to select the Hosts involved in the research was to balance the number of Hosts who rented out an entire apartment and those who rented out a private room. We started from the premise that different kinds of spaces would imply a different engagement, different starting conditions, and a different experience of the Host role. Moreover, this criterion reflects the composition of the population of the examined area, where 48% of the announcements were for private

rooms and 51% were entire apartments (the remaining 1% were shared rooms).³ Thus, after contacting 62 Hosts, we gained access to ten subjects renting out private rooms, and ten Hosts offering entire apartments. The average duration of the interviews was 90 minutes; all interviews were (audio) recorded and transcribed.

Trento, where the research was carried out, is a town in the north-eastern part of Italy, well-developed in tourist terms, being the capital city of a region well known for outdoor tourism as well as for the presence of numerous festivals/fairs and the city University (with its related conferences). In the city, the platform's users have grown significantly during the last two years (with an annual growth rate of 57%), however Airbnb is not diffused as much as it is in other Italian cities, featuring 343 listings for a total population of 115,000 residents. At the time of the research, these listings corresponded to 228 active Hosts, with 25% having more than one rental. In this regard, it is interesting to note how this 25% owns 171 lodgings, exactly 50% of the total listings⁴. Finally, compared to bigger Italian tourist cities (like Rome, Naples, Venice or Florence⁵), delegating the management of the houses rented on Airbnb to a company is not widespread in Trento: there is only one active and recently (2017) founded hosting agency in the whole province⁶, which mainly operates in the most touristic town of the same province (Riva del Garda) and which did not manage any property in Trento at the time of the research. Thus, it was possible to reach Hosts who were personally involved in the management of their spaces, and to investigate how they concretely gave shape to the role of Host and the tasks required by the platform. We are aware that it is becoming more and more common to find on Airbnb ordinary tourist structures or properties managed by professional agencies that use the platform (together with others, such as Booking.com) simply as a showcase, but we were not interested in looking at the progressive 'professionalization' of the platform. On the contrary, we believe that focusing on the experiences of 'real Hosts' provides the possibility of highlighting the invisible work required by the platform and put into practice by its users.

³ Source: <http://insideairbnb.com>

⁴ Source: <https://www.airdna.co/market-data/app/it/trentino-alto-adige-sudtirol/trento/overview>

⁵ According to Insideairbnb data, Hosts with multi-listings (with more than one active listing on the platform) for the mentioned cities are always higher than 50% in comparison to Trento.

⁶ <http://www.hosttrentino.it/>

4. The production of users and their invisible work

In this section, first we will briefly consider how Airbnb constructs and maintains its relationships with its users. That is, relying on the concept developed by Hyysalo et al. (2016), the production of users. After that, we will highlight the work performed by users in order to perform the platform and translate its contents into concrete things and actions.

As stated in the “terms and conditions of service” Airbnb users subscribe to, there are three main actors involved in the Airbnb architecture: Guests, Hosts and the platform itself.⁷ The platform defines itself as an “online marketplace” that enables its members to rent and book private spaces. Hosts can create a listing of the space(s) they want to rent out (“Host’s Services”) and Guests can search for these listings, directly communicate with the Host, and eventually book the “service”. Airbnb also states that: “Airbnb doesn’t own, create, sell, make available, control, manage, offer, deliver or provide listings or Hosts’ services, neither it is an organizer or reseller of package travels pursuant to the (EU) Directive 2015/2302. Hosts are exclusively responsible for their listings and services”⁸, thus externalizing not only the work needed to locally provide the hospitality service, but also the connected responsibilities.⁹

To become a “registered user” – creating a personal profile and being able to operate on Airbnb – it is necessary to fulfil determined requirements set by the platform, bound to various technologies and the capability to use them: having an email address or a Facebook account; being able to make and receive online payments; and owning a mobile phone number and an internet connection are all features the platform expects from its users. In other words, Hosts have to own the ‘means of production’ used to interact with the platform and to locally provide and organize the service they offer. This means they have to be already embedded in a digitally connected environment. Creating a personal profile means uploading a brief self-description (including a photo) and submitting to a set of user verification procedures, which range from checking the email address (via link), the phone number (via SMS) and the payment method (via microtransactions) to uploading the picture of an official ID. These kind of requirements set a burden of access to the platform: the accessibility is limited to a certain kind of subject and other digital infrastructures (such as Google or online banking) are turned by Airbnb into tools and infrastructures to verify users.

⁷ The Guest and Host roles are not mutually exclusive.

⁸ <https://www.airbnb.it/terms>

⁹ Point 7.1.7 in the “Terms of Service” declares that the Host signs a legally binding contract with the Guest, not with the platform.

These requirements are the grounds on which the company is able to start and continue its user production. Producing active and reliable users is crucial for Airbnb, since the company does not directly rent out the lodgings – it profits by imposing a ‘service fee’ on the transactions that occur between its members. Gathering detailed and confidential information about its users enables Airbnb to control communication and monetary flows to establish the platform as an obligatory gateway. This happens by a selective distribution of the gathered information to the interacting users: a Guest will be able to contact a Host directly from the listing, but only via the platform’s internal chat, since information such as complete name, phone number, lodging and e-mail address will be accessible only once the transaction has been concluded (i.e. the fees to Airbnb have been paid). Before the transaction is concluded, the internal chat of Airbnb censors text which contains information like phone numbers, addresses or internet links which could lead to an out-of-platform relationship between users, since this would mean Airbnb would not be able to impose ‘service fees’. This fee represents the income Airbnb earns from every transaction: it covers the 9%-12% of the fee paid by the Guest and the 3% - 5% of the Host’s reward. The difference in the ‘fee’ applied by Airbnb to Hosts and Guests further testifies to the crucial role of Hosts for the platform (the platform has an interest in ‘charging’ them less than Guests).

The importance of user generated content and information management will become clearer by looking at the listing creation procedure (from now on simply referred to as the procedure), which can be considered a boundary step between the production *of* users and the production *by* users.

4.1. Being produced while producing

If for Guests the creation of an account is a sufficient condition in order to start operating on the platform, for Hosts it is necessary to set up a listing to represent the space they intend to rent out. The procedure can be considered the first kind of work performed *by* the Host and simultaneously the most tangible step in the process of configuration and production *of* their production. It is articulated through three main phases.

Initially, the Host has to give detailed information about the space they want to list: an entire apartment or a private room in a shared apartment; the kind of building (options range from “home, apartment, hotel, apartment with hotel service” to possibilities such as “igloo, boat, train or tree house”); the number of people it can accommodate and accessible areas (e.g. kitchen, parking, swimming pool, but also declaring the precise number of beds, bedrooms, bathrooms etc.). By ticking boxes on a long list, the

Host states which services and resources they will provide, starting from those defined as “essentials”(towels, sheets, toilet paper) and continuing with Wi-Fi, hairdryer, washing machine, breakfast, A/C, lock in room or safety devices (such as fire extinguisher, first aid kit, or smoke detector). Airbnb recommends that Hosts should: “Provide the main services to make your guests feel at home. Some Hosts offer breakfast, others just some coffee or tea. None of these amenities are mandatory, but they can help your guests to feel at home”. Subsequently, the Host has to specify the address of the accommodation, while the platform ensures that: “Your exact address will be shared only with confirmed guests”.

The second phase is what Airbnb defines as “preparing the scene”: the Host has to upload some photos of the space (while the platform gives advice on how to shoot them), a “banner title” for the listing (maximum of 50 characters) and a brief description (“Describe the furnishings, the lighting, what’s nearby, etc.”).The Host is asked to hand out information, to create and upload content, while the platform assumes a “coaching” attitude towards them, giving explanations, suggestions, reassurances and, more generally, “guiding” the Host:

They give you some guidelines and this also gives you some ideas. So they ask you to describe the space where you will host the people. And they give you some suggestions, for instance “try to highlight what’s unique”...or to write if you are near to public transportation, so...and so I wrote “I live in the hills not far from city centre, easily reachable with public transportation” but it’s a tranquil place, that’s why the title is “cosy room in tranquil area”. (*Maura, 50, private room*)

The listing procedure is thus intended not only to create the ad, but also to stimulate Hosts’ creativity, in this case regarding the listing’s ‘title’, description and photos. Moreover, the listing procedure aims at leading Hosts to reconsider and reorganize their resources, continuously confronting them with the potential needs of Guests or with what other Hosts do. This becomes evident by looking at the long list of available items and services: the Host can list what they are able to offer, but foremost they can see what other Hosts do. This is an example of how the procedure merges elements of production *by* the user and production *of* the user: apart from gathering the information needed to organize a short-term rental and enacting a kind of ‘user training course’, the platform is able to gather original content produced by the user.

During the third step of the procedure, the Host has to set up the “managing tools” (calendar, price, availability, house rules and booking settings), so formalizing their relationship with the platform. Advice is given on how the online interaction procedure with Guests works and the chance is given to set some criteria the Guest has to satisfy

in order to book (such as having uploaded an official ID or having already accumulated reviews). Further, the Host has to set a fixed price¹⁰ or adopt the “smart price” service, which, depending on the market demand, lets the price fluctuate between a minimum and maximum set by the Host. The user has to denote how many days will pass between the booking and the check-in, to set a minimum/maximum number of nights for the stays and the future time-span the lodging will be available for rent (1 month, 3 months, 1 year). Editing these settings makes the Host accountable to the platform, while encouraging them to establish their future effort. Airbnb warns that: “Keeping your calendar up to date is the starting point for being a successful Host. A cancellation is a big inconvenience for Guests. If you make a cancellation because your calendar is not accurate, you will be charged a penalty and the dates in question will not be available for further bookings”.

The Host is now part of the platform: duties and responsibilities are established to the point that the Host becomes sanctionable but is also “protected with 24/7 customer service and a Host Guarantee of € 800000”. A clear disclaimer confronts the Host with other kinds of sanctions that could occur: “Since you are responsible for your decision to offer your space to rent, you should familiarise with the existing law before starting to rent through Airbnb. By accepting our terms of service and by publishing your listing, you declare that you will follow the laws and norms in force”. Thus, Airbnb’s ‘coaching’ approach is also aimed at clarifying the division of work and responsibilities between platform and Host. In linguistic terms, accepting the terms of service and publishing a listing seems to have a performative power that extends towards the future, since the Host declares the will to follow local laws regarding short-term rental. Moreover, the conclusion of the procedure and its publishing have future-oriented performative power in that they translate into an array of heterogeneous activities, duties and responsibilities which, from now on, will affect Hosts’ daily lives. That is, ‘invisible work’ is needed to perform the platform and translate its contents into practice.

5. The production by users: performing the platform

Once the ‘produced’ user has accepted the terms and conditions and is aware of the risks and procedures, they can rely on a large number of ‘managing’ tools. Hosts can

¹⁰ Airbnb gives some advice on which price to apply, calculated by factoring the lodging’s characteristics (e.g. location, type and number of bedrooms, services etc.). Here again we can see how the information submitted by the Hosts immediately becomes valuable data for Airbnb.

access a private area on the platform where they can check their calendar and details of confirmed bookings, control their mailbox, communicate with (potential) Guests, check their productivity¹¹, and also edit the booking settings, change prices, and more generally modify their listing(s). Now Guests can see the listing, contact the Host and book the lodging. This step definitively marks the transition between the initial production *of* users by the platform and the effective beginning of the production *by* users for the platform.

5.1. Preparing the scene: starting to get busy

While narrating their Host experiences, several interviewees focused on the initial investment they made to ‘prepare the scene’. Almost all interviewed Hosts purchased a new set of linens; some increased the number of glasses, plates and pots in the kitchen; many bought a new mattress; and others repainted the apartment and/or partially renewed the furniture. Thus, ‘preparing the scene’ involved going well beyond the ‘essential’ services required by the platform and Hosts’ willingness to do more (and not less) than the platform suggests. The platform leaves a broad space of action to Hosts in organizing and offering their service, and this seems to trigger spontaneous engagement: as in the case of the following interviewee (who rents out the apartment where her late mother used to live), sometimes Hosts go much further to obtain a more efficient layout and a more suitable ‘taste’ in decor:

The house is exactly how it was when my mother lived there...I just removed some personal items and added beds in the small rooms... my mother had just one bedroom, but actually the apartment has three rooms, so we organized it for five guests. So I added the beds, I renewed the wardrobe, bought some small things for the bathroom and then obviously bed linen and towels. [...] I tried to make the house more beautiful, because obviously...it was the home of an old person, the taste was a bit old fashioned. (*Lisa, 45, entire apartment*)

Besides the economic investment, on many occasions Hosts felt they had to get organized and learn how to manage the situation:

¹¹ Airbnb gathers and makes available to the Host various information and statistics about the listing, called “Achievements”, including chronology of transactions, reviews and “stars” left by the Guests, number of people who have viewed the listing, and view/booking ratio.

As soon as I published the listing an absurd number of people started to contact me and at that point, I didn't know how to manage the situation. I didn't understand the platform very well so I didn't know if I could unsave or cancel the bookings...in addition to that I didn't have anything at home. I thought I'd have more time to manage this thing. Instead they started to bombard me with requests. So I had only some towels, but not designedly for the guests. I didn't have anything to serve breakfast...and so the first days I managed to cancel the various bookings. Then I started to get busy... I went to shops to buy towels, pillows and bed linen, stuff to serve breakfast and so on. And from there I got going...
(*Marco, 35, private room*)

I started and immediately received a lot of requests, but initially I had to learn to use the rules [...] at the beginning I was very confused...I had to understand how to relate to the guests, how to organize the check-in...because indeed on the platform there aren't any defined criteria on how to...but then everything worked out just fine. (*Erica, 45, private room*)

How to cancel a booking, organize check-in, and interact with Guests on their arrival are basic issues that Hosts have to confront when starting their experience on Airbnb. Is this 'work'? Of course, it must be, given its practical necessity and usefulness (Schmidt 2011). Moreover, 'preparing the scene' is 'work' in that it requires time and effort: buying small items (like lights, dishes or towels), installing a Wi-Fi connection, and redecorating, furnishing or renovating the house are all activities that involve a certain amount of time and attention.

If purposely creating a space means mostly filling it with commodities and items that one could find in regularly inhabited apartment, renting out a private space also requires an effort that goes in the opposite direction: removing. Such removing often referred to the relocation of personal, valuable or delicate items, but – especially for those Hosts who rented out a room in their own apartment – it also meant removing one's own presence from the most suitable spaces of the house to be rented out:

So I decided to move to a smaller room of my home, leaving the big attic with private bathroom free for the guests. [...] anyway we had to remove all my and my family's stuff from there, so to leave all the wardrobes and shelves empty. (*Giorgia, 35, private room*)

I have one guest room and one double bedroom which is bigger. And I live in the guest room when I have Airbnb guests, so I give my room to guests. Obviously then I leave the closet I have in my double bedroom always empty, otherwise I would

have to move all my stuff every time someone comes [...] however privacy vanishes quite a lot...you know you don't have privacy when you have guests. (*Marco, 35, private room*)

These excerpts show how removing personal items is only one of the ways Hosts remove their own presence from certain areas of the house and reshape the character of the domestic spaces: one Host explained how she swapped rooms with her daughter's smaller one when the latter moved abroad to study; another one gave up her home hobby-workshop to create a guest room. 'Preparing the scene' sometimes affects the way Hosts inhabit their own private spaces, losing their 'privacy' once they become public.

5.2. Maintaining the scene: paying attention

'Preparing the scene' is not a one-time activity limited to adapting and embellishing the space, but is rather an ongoing process that entails constant effort and meticulous attention:

I have to clean up much more... I try to keep everything more in order. Starting this thing helped me, because I was a bit... very relaxed, so I was used to leave stuff around, and now... knowing that there are guests, before they arrive, I clean everything. If I am in the living room and go to my room I bring my stuff with me, I don't leave it there... I try to wash the dishes as soon as I finish eating... I mean, I have to keep the house clean... it obliges you to do things you normally wouldn't do... and sometimes it's positive, I may also be happy about it, but on the other hand, sometimes I say to myself: "Fuck! Today I really don't want to..." but I have to! (*Giulia, 30, private room*)

Maintaining the scene affects the Hosts' daily routine, as it "obliges you to do things you normally wouldn't" (such as immediately cleaning the dishes or not leaving stuff around). Other Hosts reported not showering too early in the morning and avoiding music or dinners with friends so as to not disturb Guests, and to give access priority to Guests for the toilet or kitchen. But maintaining the scene also implies further investments and 'management costs', and more generally it can be related to the work enacted to fulfil 'higher standards':

Because of the feedback, you have to keep a high level of order and of the services you offer to the guests, so you have to dedicate more time...you have bigger ex-

penses to make changes, to refurbish the apartment. Obviously now you notice it more if something is broken, or if something is particularly ugly, you pay more attention. In fact, this is also why one has more expenses in comparison to a long-term rental, management costs. Because the apartment is still yours, but you need to keep higher standards. (*Piero, 30, entire apartment*)

In contrast to the 'absence' shown above, becoming a Host also requires constant attention and presence, which manifests in heterogeneous ways, each corresponding to a different kind of effort. The excerpt above shows how 'to give more attention' means to maintain a 'high level of order' and 'services'; to 'find a solution' for broken or ugly things; to accept 'management costs' and so, broadly speaking, to dedicate extra time and expenses to the house. More generally the 'management costs' interviewees typically face are for cleaning expenses¹², reparations and items they buy to meet Guests' necessities. This 'commitment' is somehow related to the platform's public feedback system and thus the opportunity of continuing to operate on Airbnb in the future:

If you want to achieve results you have to pay attention... otherwise, if you aren't punctual... if it's unclean, or if you aren't precise in the communications and descriptions... or for the check-ins, let's say you will be affected... also regarding the feedback! (*Sandra, 50, entire apartment*)

This excerpt demonstrates how the rating system contributes to improving and keeping constant the Hosts' efforts and productivity. Airbnb establishes a public rating system, which consists of two kinds of user feedbacks: 'qualitative' text (freely written) and star-ratings (1 to 5), both referring to some of the lodging's/Host's specific features (such as location, value, cleanness etc.). If reviews help consumers in their booking choices, they are also useful for the platform to constantly monitor and evaluate the quality of the service provided by Hosts. In this sense, it is worth noticing that even 'quality-checks' are externalized and carried out by platform users.

5.3. Managing online and offline presence

Host's online presence is constantly fostered by the platform, which, apart from calculating and publicly displaying a 'response rate' for every Host, sends reminders to

¹² This is so common that 'cleaning costs' can be added by the Host as an extra amount the Guest has to pay when booking the listing. Some Hosts set this fee to pay for detergents and other necessary tools, others to pay the person they delegate the cleaning work to.

Hosts (in the form of emails, SMSs or app push notifications) for any of the following situations: “you received a booking”, “your guests will arrive soon”, and “you still have X days to write a review”. From this point of view, the production of users never quite ends, being a constant strategy carried out by the platform to keep users active and attentive. This encourages Hosts to develop autonomous strategies and practices to assure the online presence the platform requires. For example, a well diffused coping strategy Hosts reported was to prepare standardized messages for Guests with the necessary information to organize their arrival. Moreover, the use of ubiquitous connected computing devices (such as the app) mean that Hosts are always reachable ‘in real time’, so that they can carry out parts of their duties wherever and whenever they want and in turn marginal times become productive, as in the following case:

Since there’s the app, I use it... it notifies everything in real time, wherever you are. Obviously, I pay more attention to my mobile... sometimes it’s a source of stress, for example in the daytime I don’t use the mobile at all because I’m at work [...] I noticed that the only times I look at it it’s exactly because of Airbnb, or in the morning when I’m on the bus... it is a one-hour ride, so I answer to all the... for instance, I write and publish all the reviews... all at once, in the morning during the bus ride, or when I get back home... (*Anna, 25, private room*)

This excerpt is representative of the many ways in which Hosts themselves translate the platform into an everyday practice. As in the case just seen, this commonly happens by linking activities related to the management of the online ad (such as answering requests or publishing Guest reviews) to everyday routines. This brings us back to the ‘new’ production of users (Hyysalo et al. 2016): for platform-organizations it is fundamental not only to produce active and creative users, but also to find ways of stimulating users’ activity and creativity (for example, by making a smartphone app available), so that they will keep the platform updated and alive.

But online activity goes far beyond (and overlaps) physical activity, since during the Guests’ stay Hosts may have to answer new requests or write reviews for past stays: as one of the interviewees reported, “Guests keep you busy from before their arrival to after their departure”. To organize and carry out the Guests’ check-in is another aspect of the hosting activity where we can clearly recognize how the Hosts’ spare time is affected in the long as well as the short-term:

I said to myself: “The check-in is at 10pm... so I go out eating with my friends first”. While we were eating, the Guests texted: “At midnight”. My sister was with me, so I asked her to stay until midnight...we went out for a drink and then we arrived

there. The Guests stared at us and asked, "Why are you dressed like this, is there some party?"...we laughed a lot. (*Alice, 30, entire apartment*)

I almost never have late check-in requests. But I find a way to manage it somehow, sometimes it happens that I may renounce to stay outside or to go out because I have this commitment here...but however it's remunerated and so it's like... kind of a second job. In the worst case, if I have an appointment I really cannot miss, I ask friends or relatives to help me out... (*Duccio, 30, two private rooms*)

These excerpts (like those about online presence) highlight how blurred the line between spare time and productive time can become while 'performing the platform'. Giving shape to this line by managing time is one of the efforts Hosts continuously carry out. The work performed to coordinate the check in with the Guests, or in some cases, with the people the check-in is delegated to, are clear examples of 'pieces' of work that are not visible precisely because of the times and the actors involved. Indeed, establishing a local division of work, in the sense of delegating some part of the tasks to others in a constant or sporadic way, was a normal practice for most of the interviewed Hosts. The number of different ad-hoc task-division constellations retraceable in the Hosts' narrations was variegated, being a combination of many different local 'factors' and changing over time. However, the effort to establish and maintain those constellations (or to find strategies and practices to carry out all the tasks alone) were themselves examples of the various forms of work enacted by Hosts to manage the tasks required by the platform.

The large number of creative and 'spontaneous' practices and strategies Hosts enact to carry out tasks and duties can also be framed as the result of a user production strategy in itself. The invisible work entailed in performing the platform is tightly intertwined with other strategies deployed during the production of users, as for instance the initial information gathering or the 'tools' inscribed in the platform (the calendar, the internal chat system, the public rating system, the alerts and reminders). Curiously, rather than perceiving these elements as forms of profit-oriented control enacted by the platform, the interviewees interpreted them as necessary in order to build trust, elevating the platform to a guarantor role, as if it had no goal itself.

6. Concluding remarks

Coming to the end of this paper, we would like to provide an answer to our initial question: in what ways does everyday private life become a productive element for platform organizations?

In the case of Airbnb, it seems to us that the answer points to the production *of* and *by* users. That is, to the ability of the platform to produce engaged and creative users while fragmenting work in various micro-tasks. Creating the listing, preparing the space, maintaining it, being absent/present, answering requests, writing reviews, organizing time schedules – can all be seen as micro-tasks that can be fulfilled at marginal times by interchangeable actors (and so adapted to the Hosts' local situation). This fragmentation of tasks, in addition to the fact that some can be fulfilled from anywhere or delegated to others, contribute to the possibility of the platform 'installing' itself in users' private lives and resources, evoking forms of production, value extraction and work organization previously unknown.

The coordination of these micro-tasks is an open process that entails invisible work being continuously carried out by Hosts. This work consists of the practices and strategies that Hosts enact to adapt their spare time, social ties and domestic space to the platform's requirements and the Guests' needs. Hosts perform the content of the platform and this performance often coincides with a more general re-articulation of the house spaces, made up of 'filling' and 'emptying' practices aimed at meeting Guests' expectations and preserving the Host's intimacy. In particular, such 'emptying' often implies the removal of the presence of the Host themselves (such as when the Host 'gives' a part of the house previously used by them to the Guests) or the effort to become invisible in their own home. Thus, Hosts continue the 'production' started by the platform, linking its contents to concrete practices, while turning private time, spaces and relations into productive elements for the platform itself. Not only that, Hosts make available to the company a series of technologies essential for the management of the service (such as smartphones or PCs). From this point of view, it could be argued that while the platform provides 'managing tools' to Hosts (calendar, check-in/out time, and so on), Hosts provide the 'means of production' to the platform to locally provide and organize the service.

It is quite clear that Hosts are the essential element of the platform. As happens with other platforms, the organization is not responsible for platform content and/or listed spaces, nor for the potentially illegal behaviour of Hosts (for instance, regarding local short-term rental regulations). A division of labour and responsibilities is thus presented, together with the fundamental characters involved in the platform: Airbnb Inc. and

its 'members', subdivided into Host (provider) and Guest (consumer) roles. These two roles do not have the same strategic importance for the platform: Hosts are those who make their 'space' available and build the platform market; moreover, Hosts interact with Guests and are in charge of setting the physical space listed on the platform. In other words, besides the 'service fee' the company imposes on transactions between users, Hosts are the main source of value for the platform.

But the most important value Hosts add to the platform is their work. We have highlighted the different kinds of efforts, duties, responsibilities, practices and strategies entailed in the work carried out by Airbnb Hosts. In particular, describing the everyday practices of 'house-management' enacted by the Hosts, and we have stressed the invisible work entailed in performing the platform. As from the original definition by Star and Strauss (1999), the work that needs to be performed largely takes place in 'hidden' organizational times and spaces (in that Hosts largely rely on their spare time). Moreover, it is mostly routine or manual work, although it presupposes an ability to improvise (such as for the organization of check-ins). The perpetuation and maintenance of the service is strictly linked to a series of actions and interactions that, besides their importance, would be difficult to mention in a job description, given that as we have just seen, they are basically micro-tasks. From this point of view, it is worth noting that there are no significant differences between Hosts renting their entire apartment and those offering a private room. They all perform the same kind of invisible work, so that practices such as 'filling', 'emptying', 'paying attention' and 'managing online and offline presence' appear to be transversal. In the same vein, regardless of the kind of space being rented out (entire apartment or private room), Hosts tend to delegate parts of their activity to 'transparent actors', for example when the cleaning of the house or the welcoming of Guests is delegated to Hosts' relatives or other (paid or unpaid) people. In this regard, it is not the kind of space owned by Hosts that makes a difference but their network of relationships.

Curiously, Hosts seem to voluntarily enter into this relationship with the platform and are willing to maintain it. This result is achieved through a process of "generification" (Pollock, Williams and D'Adderio 2016), which gives to users enough autonomy to decide how to enact the platform's requests. In a way, it is as if control is exerted not through limiting the possibilities of action but multiplying them. In so doing, the platform can approach Hosts with different local conditions, resources, and levels of engagement in a standardized manner. It is here that the management of communication and information by the platform becomes of crucial importance. Gathering information is of fundamental importance for the platform, in that this data constitutes a large part of its content and allows the coming-into-being of Airbnb itself. Moreover, detailed and

updated information, thanks to Guests' reviews, allow for the monitoring of Hosts' 'performances' and their adherence to the standards required by the platform. The platform itself continues to produce the Hosts, maintaining a constant relationship with the latter through a system of notifications sent via SMS and e-mails that remind them of the tasks to be performed (such as the arrival of Guests, a reservation request or writing a review). Again, while this kind of communication is intended to put pressure on Hosts, they are expressed through suggestions, recommendations, and 'friendly reminders'.

In conclusion, once private spaces have been commodified (Zukin 2010) and 'work' has been turned into micro-tasks and friendly reminders, everyday private life can easily become a productive element for platform organizations.

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