

# THE **airbnb** 'MOVEMENT' FOR DEREGULATION

HOW PLATFORM-SPONSORED GRASSROOTS  
LOBBYING IS CHANGING POLITICS



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## CONTENTS

<b>Executive summary .....</b>	4
<b>Introduction .....</b>	8
<b>Narratives of promise and disappointment</b>	
Airbnb and the 'sharing economy' .....	13
<b>What are Home Sharing Clubs for?</b>	
Airbnb's response to regulatory pressure .....	18
<b>Who joins Airbnb's Home Sharing Clubs?</b>	
Recruitment, selection and exclusion .....	23
<b>How is Airbnb affiliated with Home Sharing Clubs?</b>	
Resources, support and independence .....	28
<b>Evaluating the effects of Airbnb's sponsored grassroots lobbying .....</b>	33
<b>The Airbnb Model?</b>	
Current practices and future prospects of corporate grassroots lobbying .....	38
<b>Conclusions and recommendations .....</b>	44
<b>References .....</b>	48

## Executive summary

This report is about the ethics and transparency of corporate political organising. Its case study is Airbnb, one of the biggest companies in the 'platform' economy, who resources, mobilises and coordinates its landlords as political advocates to lobby for its preferred forms of regulation.

Since 2008, numbers of short-term lettings, many of which might otherwise house permanent residents, have expanded dramatically. The associated problems, around housing shortages, tourism, taxation and urban conviviality, have led to social movement opposition and local attempts to regulate. Airbnb's use of *grassroots lobbying*, where businesses influence democratic institutions by creating and coordinating apparently independent social movements to act on their behalf, has been key in their response. **Airbnb presents carefully curated and intensively coordinated groups of landlords with a single room or property as 'people power': independent grassroots groups who share its policy preferences. This offers the company legitimacy and additional political influence to protect a business model that is increasingly dominated by professional accommodation providers.**

*Platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying* is a public form of corporate lobbying, yet little is known about it. It is becoming widely used across the new digital 'platform' economy, from ride-hailing companies such as Uber and Lyft, to delivery companies such as Doordash, to the rapidly scaling electric scooter industry. Grassroots lobbying is now a key tactic for disruptive new businesses facing regulation, but its current scale, how it works, and its social and political impacts, have received little attention.

This report is the first in-depth empirical study of platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying. It analyses documents and interviews with twenty-one former Airbnb public policy staff who worked across fourteen countries in North America and Europe, in the most intensive and sustained platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying strategy

in the world to date. The report focuses on the campaigning practices of the groups Airbnb creates and coordinates that it calls '*Home Sharing Clubs*'.

*Home Sharing Clubs* are associations of selected Airbnb landlords who are resourced, mobilised and coordinated by Airbnb public policy teams to advocate for favourable regulation. These associations are made up of an unrepresentative segment of Airbnb landlords – mainly those that share their own homes or rent them short-term. They are created predominately and in disproportionate numbers in cities where the effects of Airbnb are leading to calls for stricter regulation. Like more traditional lobbying and PR practices, they target public officials and public opinion. They have been deployed in hundreds of towns and cities globally.

The report focuses on key themes that are important for understanding Airbnb's strategy and making sense of grassroots lobbying across the new digital economy. These are 1) the context of a new, contested way of doing business, the 'sharing economy'; 2) the purpose of platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying; 3) the question of who participates; 4) the precise relationship these campaigns have with companies who resource them; 5) the implications of these campaigns, and 6) the wider practice of platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying. The report finds that public claims made by Airbnb concerning each of these questions are currently misleading or lack transparency.

### Narratives of promise

### and disappointment

#### Airbnb and the 'sharing economy'

- Airbnb, like the Sharing Economy, was initially championed for its potential to create new sources of income, employment, and strengthen community. Many of these benefits have not materialised.
- Airbnb has grown rapidly, with tens of thousands of listings in many cities. This appears to affect availability of housing for permanent residents, contributing towards gentrification.

- The majority (59%) of Airbnb listings are 'professional accommodation offers', only 8% of listings are one room of a single home. High availability throughout the year for many listings removes them from the residential market. An industry of property management companies now allows landlords to play little role in 'hosting'. (Adamiak 2019, other data sources, e.g. Cox and Haar 2020, show that revenue from commercial operators outweighs that of home-sharing by an even greater margin)
- Professional landlords on the platform, the most controversial and accounting for a majority of listings, are excluded, apparently in order to present a more benign narrative of the company.
- After an extensive search for appropriate recruits, Airbnb staff hold an intensive series of meetings and meet-ups with those who have 'good stories', building trust and increasing their 'asks', which become increasingly political and involve increasing responsibility.
- Specific landlords' personal biographies or curated 'stories' are subsequently used in marketing and for court hearings and campaigns to lobby key decision makers.

*Airbnb's public narratives continue to highlight a minority of cases on the platform, misleadingly suggesting they are representative of the business.*

## What are Home Sharing Clubs for?

### Airbnb's response to regulatory pressure

- Airbnb's mobilisation tactics and the home-sharing club originated in heavily resourced key regulatory struggles in San Francisco, Barcelona, and New York. The clubs are associations of selected Airbnb landlords that are resourced, mobilised and coordinated to advocate for favourable regulation. Since then, numbers have grown to around 350-400 globally.
- Interviews with former staff, job descriptions, public speeches from key Airbnb staff show that clubs and their paid organisers are evaluated in terms of their success in building campaigns and mobilising users for favourable regulation.
- Clubs hold meetings, attend and give evidence in legislative hearings, lobby officials by phone-banking, letter-writing, in-person or by open petitions, liaise with media, and convene protests.

*Yet public facing materials from the company downplay their political function*

## Who joins Airbnb's Home Sharing Clubs?

### Recruitment, selection and exclusion

- Participation in Airbnb's political campaigns and composition of Home Sharing Clubs is carefully curated.

*These findings contrast with Airbnb's public account of the composition of Airbnb's campaigns, which suggests an organic and highly diverse 'community' movement of Airbnb stakeholders.*

## How is Airbnb affiliated with Home Sharing Clubs?

### Resources, support and independence

- The support, resources and influence offered by Airbnb to Home Sharing Clubs is extensive.
- Airbnb former staff describe many forms of support and influence, including protesting alongside landlords; organising many aspects of protests; political education and training; editing and rehearsing of curated 'stories'; and suggesting policy that the company wanted.
- There are examples of clubs disagreeing with Airbnb or highlighting the problem of business hosts, suggesting that sometimes campaigns did demonstrate independence. Yet these examples are presented as failures of the public policy team. The aims of clubs and the aim that they are 'independent' are contradictory priorities which staff struggle to negotiate.

*Airbnb, contrary to this evidence, continue to claim that its home sharing clubs are independent of the company.*

## Evaluating the effects of Airbnb's Home Sharing Clubs and grassroots lobbying

- Many former employees see Airbnb's grassroots lobbying strategy as problematic because the ethos of community organising is at odds with the company's corporate goals.
- There are also concerns about insufficient public transparency about the support offered by the company; and fears that Airbnb's tactics give them further unfair political advantages over local citizen campaigns and governments.
- Other interviewees think that grassroots lobbying is an improvement on standard lobbying, or is justified by the benign nature of Airbnb or of the landlords supported.
- Several former staff consider the tactic positive because it increased participation in absolute terms in certain public political processes.

*Former Airbnb employees voice a range of concerns about the implications of Home Sharing Clubs.*

## The Airbnb Model?

### Current practices and future prospects of corporate grassroots lobbying

- Current platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying takes four forms: short-term **user mobilisation** such as corporate petitions or form letters; **partnerships with grassroots alliances**; the creation of new grassroots-style **front groups**; and the deployment of **curated stories** of users. Airbnb's Home Sharing Clubs are front groups which extensively use curated stories in their mobilisation.
- Corporate grassroots lobbying practices are now widely employed by platform businesses, including Uber, Lyft, Doordash, GetAround, Lime, Scoot, Spin, Bird and Lyft Scooters.
- There is evidence to suggest that platform economy businesses have innovated around existing corporate political organising techniques

and are rejuvenating and inspiring corporate 'grassroots' campaigns elsewhere (e.g. with Juul, the biggest global vaping company)

- Corporate grassroots lobbying is becoming a viable career. The professionalisation of techniques such as community organising in the third sector and electoral campaigning, and the higher salaries available in the private sector, is driving the increase in the use of these practices.

*Corporate grassroots lobbying practices are developing rapidly in the platform economy and becoming increasingly important in corporate public affairs, yet they currently operate without regulation or public awareness.*

## Recommendations for policy, practitioners and civil society

The report makes several recommendations. It calls for:

1. **Statutory lobbying registers that require disclosure of funds spent on corporate grassroots lobbying** over an expenditure threshold, including the details of those lobbying and their clients, covering in-house and consultant lobbyists, detailing the purpose and target of the lobbying, and clear categorisation of the activities and methods deployed.
2. **Sufficient resources for municipal governments to enforce local regulation to protect local housing:** in the context of widespread housing crisis, local policy-makers need greater support in enforcing regulatory approaches which reduce the danger of short-term lettings diminishing housing stock.
3. **Records of meetings between policy-makers and grassroots lobbyists.**
4. **Reviews of public consultations and other democratic forums** being used by the private sector in the most affected countries that focus on how these institutions can be better safeguarded against undue influence by corporate interests.

**5. Analysis of the legality and ethics of the political use of platform data.** Airbnb, Uber, Lyft and other companies gather extensive customer data that is deployed for grassroots political organising and augmented through these campaigns, yet most users are unaware of having consented to becoming targets for recruitment to corporate political organising.

**6. Adherence by companies to responsible lobbying guidelines,** with public disclosure of the resources they are using to support grassroots lobbying and in what forums, as part of their commitment to corporate social responsibility and transparency.

# Introduction

## Grassroots lobbying in the Platform Economy

Since the financial and economic crisis of 2008, a number of digital platform businesses including Airbnb, Uber and Deliveroo have transformed the worlds of transportation, accommodation, food delivery and employment. It is less often noted that they are also changing the nature of democratic political systems. There was much initial enthusiasm for what was provisionally named the 'sharing' or 'collaborative' economy, referring to digital 'platform' businesses with few assets which connect consumers with providers of services. This report uses the more neutral term *platform economy*.

Despite early optimism and influential advocates, critics have since pointed towards the precarious forms of employment and labour rights abuses that many platforms rely on, unregulated and untaxed consumption, intensified gentrification and loss of affordable housing, problematic forms of tourism, and the advance of private economic interests at the expense of the public good. Where governments or civil society have contested the rapid expansion of platforms or have attempted to hold platform businesses to account for their roles in these problems, they have been met with creative and well-resourced political responses from the corporations – and increasingly from their users. The future of the new digital economy depends on these struggles.<sup>1</sup>

An important tactic used by platform economy businesses in these conflicts has been *platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying*. Platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying is a controversial public policy approach for using the methods and power of collective action by citizens to shape regulation and public policy, win public legitimacy, and neutralise critical social movements in the area of the platform economy. Platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying is an important and often overlooked example of how the collection of data and use

of digital applications common to Silicon Valley businesses has far-reaching implications for political participation and democracy.<sup>2</sup>

There are new and established processes at work, creating academic and regulatory blind spots. Grassroots lobbying, here used interchangeably with corporate grassroots lobbying, is a term used to describe the commercial use of grassroots political action for corporations, trade associations, some advocacy organisations and electoral campaigning, became common in the United States through the development of public affairs consultancies during the 1980s, an industry also benefiting through new digital methods of collecting and analysing data about political preferences.<sup>3</sup>



The history of corporate power and funding of political influence is much longer, and the ways in which business has developed new ways of shaping publics and public decision-making is a regular source of controversy. Yet corporate grassroots lobbying was until recently little used outside the contexts of public affairs consultancies. Lobbying regulation rarely acknowledges corporate grassroots methods, meaning that there is little oversight and little is known about the practices.<sup>4</sup> Grassroots lobbying overlaps with contemporary public relations practices<sup>5</sup> and diverse forms of community- or politically-inflected marketing such as 'cause' or 'purpose' marketing and 'brand communities'.<sup>6</sup>

Platform economy businesses, in contrast with most cases described in the literature, have initiated their own in-house grassroots strategies rather than using public affairs consultancies. Distinctively, platform businesses also mobilise their own users. Platforms collect significant amounts of data about their users and often have ways of communicating with them that are convenient, intimate and powerful. These include the widespread use of push-button notifications on apps which invite smartphone users to, using the most common example, sign a petition or contact a particular political representative to 'save' the service or company that the app facilitates.<sup>7</sup>

There are various potential debates raised by the prospect of businesses increasingly mobilising their users to advocate politically on their behalf.

- The first debate concerns **transparency**: the practices of grassroots lobbying and the considerable financial resources backing these groups them are not recognised in government, the media or civil society, and there is evidence that they are mistaken for organic civil society initiatives. Globally, they are very seldom registered as a matter of public record, due to light lobbying regulation. If the funding and nature of relationship between the groups and businesses are made transparent, would they continue to be effective?
- The second debate is around the **distribution of power and benefits**. Grassroots groups and third-sector organisers emphasise that their methods help to distribute power and challenge vested interests. Yet the successes of mobilising platform business users appear likely to accrue disproportionately to the businesses. They may disadvantage ordinary citizens and in some cases the mobilised constituency themselves.<sup>8</sup> The successful practice of grassroots lobbying campaigning may be associated with further job losses, missed opportunities to secure employment rights, the gentrification of cities, and loss of permanent housing.<sup>9</sup>
- A third overarching debate is about **corporate power vis-a-vis democratic institutions**. There is a risk that public participation, consultations, and other civil society arrangements that allow citizens to shape policy become dominated by corporations.<sup>10</sup> In encroaching on traditional civil society, grassroots organisations and campaigning techniques; corporate political organising may crowd out organic movements that originate in communities and change the meaning of political action.<sup>11</sup> This may undermine opportunities to challenge the problems caused by corporations and corporate political power, and may further erode public trust in institutions, government and civil society. Platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying may undermine the capacity of citizens to shape society democratically.
- Yet a final debate is around the extent to which grassroots lobbying, operating at its best, might **empower citizens and expand public participation**. The significant financial resources and expertise mobilised by businesses in campaigning, supporting or sponsoring political activity surely has the potential to allow citizens to engage more fully in civil society and in democratic processes. In certain contexts, if transparency and inclusivity were dramatically improved, might sponsorship or support from corporations help to break down inequalities in participation, strengthen and stimulate community resilience, and open up institutions and decision-making forums to increased public scrutiny?

This report considers the evidence for these arguments through an extended case study of the most intensively resourced and ambitious

programme of platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying in the world to date. The case study is of Airbnb's 'Home Sharing Clubs': associations of selected Airbnb landlords that are trained to advocate for favourable regulation.

## Community Strategist

POSTED ON 1/24/2020 CLOSED ON 4/8/2020

 Lyft  New York City, NY  Full Time

### Job Posting for Community Strategist at Lyft

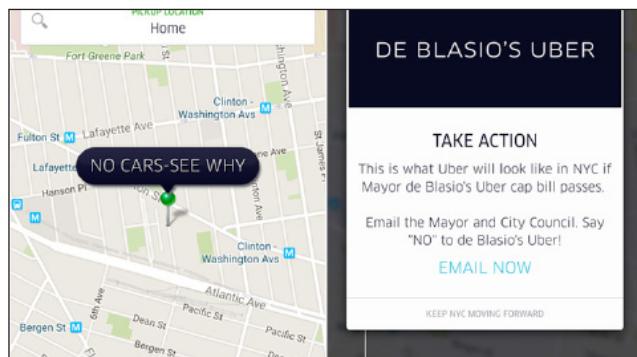
At Lyft, our mission is to improve people's lives with the world's best transportation. To do this, we're creating an open, inclusive, and diverse organization. Lyft is looking for dynamic, talented Community Strategists to authentically develop strategy in markets, supporting and promoting Lyft's policy initiatives as well as spearheading local programs. Regional Community leads, Community Strategists will be a key part of building the Lyft movement for progress nationwide. In some instances, but not all, Strategists will manage Community

As the community maven for Lyft in their local community, Community Strategists will develop authentically with Lyft drivers, riders, and community allies in order to engage them on policy. This person will also help drive collaboration with Lyft's Social Impact team, overseeing execution of

### Responsibilities:

- Translate national goals into local strategy, developing comprehensive community affairs plans across multiple markets
- Work cross-functionally across the Lyft organization in multiple markets to build relationships with essential members of the Lyft community and to engage those key community members in Lyft's policy and social impact goals
- Work closely with Public Policy Managers to develop and execute a local community engagement plan for the ridesharing movement and Lyft's local legislative initiatives
- Oversee the creation of a diverse coalition of supporters by managing relationships with advocacy organizations, and trade associations in Lyft's markets
- Create and execute scalable rapid response and long-term grassroots engagement strategies at all levels

Recent job advertisements for the role of Community Strategist at ride-hailing business Lyft.<sup>12</sup>



Uber's 2015 communications campaign versus New York City proposals to cap Uber numbers included introducing a 'DeBlasio Mode' to its app, referring to NYC mayor Bill DeBlasio. Users seeking an Uber ride would find 'No cars' then be encouraged to email the mayor with a form letter opposing the proposal.

The public health and economic crisis associated with the Covid-19 pandemic lends the governance and future of the new digital economy further urgency. Online retailers and initially, meal delivery services, experienced increased demand as high street closures and job losses elsewhere in the

economy rose. Increased unemployment from the most affected sectors may push more workers into precarious and low-paid industries where platform businesses are redefining expectations around workers' rights and shifting economic and health risks onto employees and the state.

Rental platforms such as Airbnb are in a state of potential reconfiguration due to restrictions in international travel and tourism. Anticipated decreases in demand due to recessionary economies are also leading Deliveroo and Uber to cut back on employees, with critics asking how long their expansion and lack of profitability can be sustainable.<sup>13</sup> The current context is a watershed moment for evaluating digital platforms, their contribution to society, their governance, and their future. Airbnb's recent IPO, furthermore, suggests an important moment for stepping back from its practices and the way it is transforming cities, and to imagine how its problems might be addressed and the platform reconfigured.

## The data

This report draws on an in-depth case study of Airbnb. The analysis primarily examines semi-structured interviews with twenty-one former public policy employees of the company, working at different levels and working across fourteen different countries. They are primarily staff who worked at some point in the role of Community Organiser, who have front-line responsibility for creating and convening home sharing clubs in terms of recruitment, curating groups and leading on actions such as petitions, protests and testimonies.

The interviews also include more senior public policy staff, several of whom were present in the earliest mobilisations resourced by Airbnb. The highest rank, held by two interviewees, was Head of Public Policy, each responsible for several countries and with responsibility for relationships with governments and for negotiating and challenging regulation. The report focuses mainly on staff based in North America and Europe, where staff helped design,

manage or lead on the major early campaigns Airbnb has fought in cities and countries which sought to regulate the company. It is reasonable to assume that more cities and countries will follow the lead of these forerunners and that Airbnb's tactics will be reused and developed further in these contexts.<sup>14</sup>

The remainder of this report provides evidence of how digital platforms are being governed through the case study of Airbnb's Home Sharing Clubs. The discussion is divided into six parts:

- *First, an introduction to the debates and struggles that circulate around the sharing economy and short-term rentals, the context for Airbnb's grassroots lobbying campaigns.*
- *Second, a description of Airbnb's campaigning model, noting its origins in prominent conflicts in the key cities of San Francisco, Barcelona and New York. This part highlights the purposes, aims and main practices of Home Sharing Clubs.*
- *Third, an explanation of who participates in campaigns and how participants are recruited.*
- *Fourth, a review of the various forms of support offered by the company to participants in Home Sharing Clubs.*
- *Fifth, a discussion of the implications of platform-based grassroots lobbying, drawing in particular on interviewees' anxieties highlighting reflections and critiques of the practices from practitioners.*
- *Sixth, an exploration of the influence of Airbnb, the wider practices of platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying with Uber, Lyft, several e-scooter companies and vaping giant Juul, and a consideration of the future of platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying.*

These sections also correspond to some central claims made by Airbnb in its public-facing materials about Home Sharing Clubs: 1) that fighting against regulation is only one of their many purposes; 2) that clubs are 'independent' of the corporation; 3) that clubs are made up of a diverse constituency of stakeholders of landlords, guests, small business owners and local civil society leaders; and 4) that their impact is chiefly the empowerment of ordinary people and the education of society and law-makers.<sup>15</sup>

We finish by drawing out some recommendations for how government, civil society and business might deal with platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying and in particular the case of Airbnb.

 At least one interviewee worked in this country

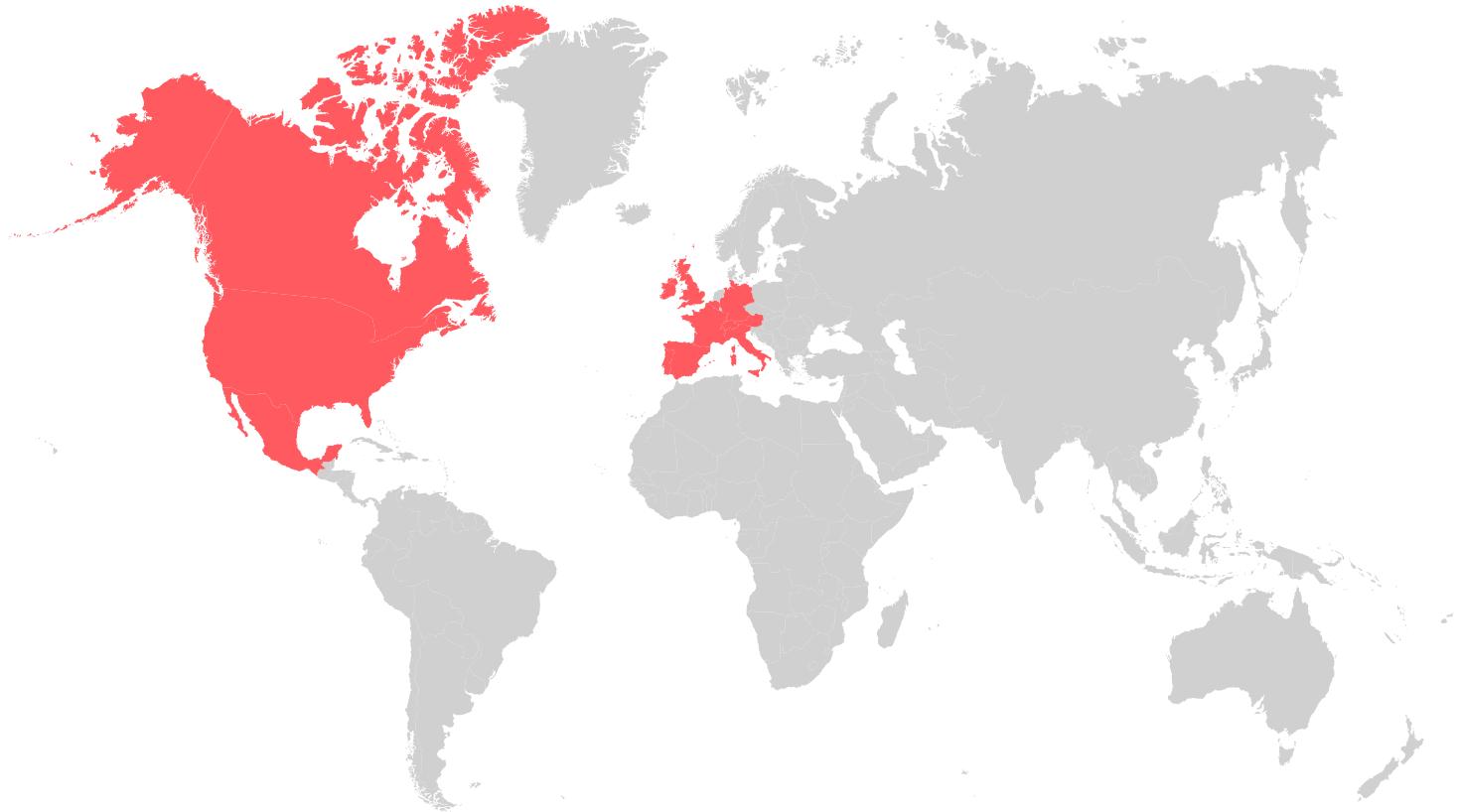


Figure 3: Map showing where interviewees this study was based on worked while engaged in roles relating to public policy for Airbnb or in struggles around it

## Narratives of promise and disappointment: Airbnb and the 'sharing economy'

- Airbnb, like the Sharing Economy, was initially championed for its potential to create new sources of income, employment, and strengthen community. Many of these benefits have not materialised.
- Airbnb has grown rapidly, with tens of thousands of listings in many cities. This appears to affect availability of housing for permanent residents and contributes towards gentrification.
- The majority (59%) of Airbnb listings are 'professional accommodation offers', only 8% of listings are one room of a single home. High availability throughout the year for many listings removes them from the residential market. An industry of property management companies now allows landlords to play little role in 'hosting'.
- Airbnb's PR narratives continue to highlight a minority of cases on the platform, misleadingly suggesting they are representative of the business.

### What was the sharing economy?

Airbnb was the poster child for a set of businesses and some non-profit economic initiatives which emerged during or immediately after the global economic crisis of 2008/2009. These were linked by some new terms, most prominently the 'sharing' or 'collaborative' economy. A morally laden vocabulary defined the field, coined in optimistic books by consultants, championed by associations and think-tanks, and popularised in the media. Academia followed quickly behind, with a series of competing definitions and typologies that aimed, with telling difficulties, to make sense of these new terminologies.<sup>16</sup>

It took between five and ten years for a more balanced appreciation of the impacts of these

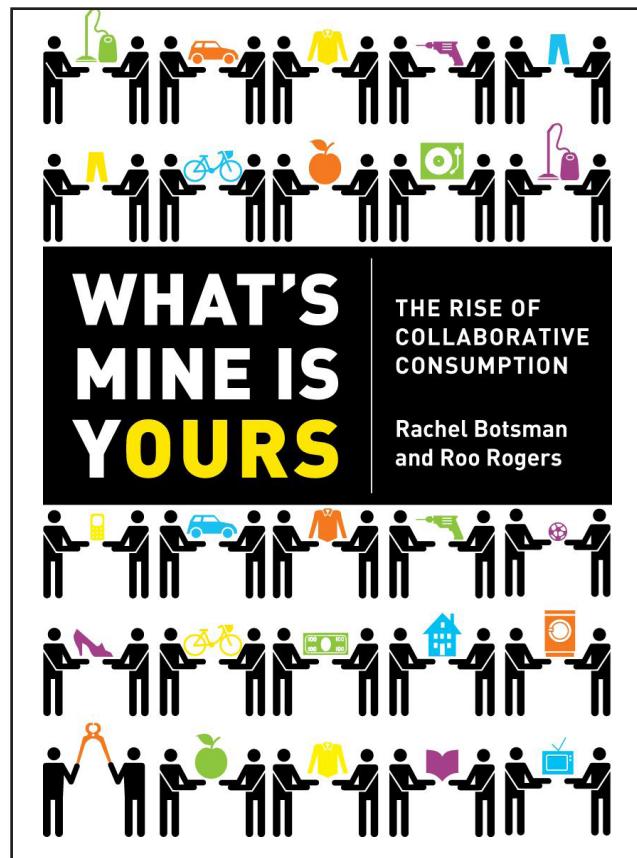
digital platforms, but during this time businesses had secured significant institutional support and intellectual validation. By 2016 the European Commission had declared the collaborative economy to hold 'significant potential to contribute to competitiveness and growth [...] to promote new employment opportunities, flexible working arrangements and new sources of income' (European Commission 2016: 2). The sector was heralded influentially as an answer to environmental crisis by 'leveraging under-used assets'.<sup>17</sup>

*'The collaborative economy creates new opportunities for consumers and entrepreneurs [...] by enabling individual citizens to offer services, they also promote new employment opportunities, flexible working arrangements and new sources of income. For consumers, the collaborative economy can provide benefits through new services, an extended supply, and lower prices. It can also encourage more asset-sharing and more efficient use of resources, which can contribute to the EU's sustainability agenda'* (European Commission 2016, 'A European agenda for the collaborative economy', Communication to the European Parliament)

Yet, in the same year, articles by journalists and even prominent former advocates expressed dismay at the direction of travel of the sector. A key figure from non-profit Ouishare, Sharing Economy luminary Arthur de Grave, wrote in 2016 'So Long, Collaborative Economy!', admitting 'I just don't believe in it anymore'.<sup>18</sup> Similar to Sarah Kessler's 2015 article 'The Sharing Economy is Dead, and We Killed It',<sup>19</sup> authors now tend to recap, and reject, the seductive idea at the heart of the concept: the potentially significant expansion in the communitarian 'sharing' of goods that are rarely used or used inefficiently. This promise to better make use of the 'idle capacity' of power tools, parking spaces, or the commutes of a mainly empty car suggested ecological benefits.

The informal economic engagements and sense of conviviality that surround child-minding, 'lifts' to the shops and 'odd jobs' were at the heart of the vision. It drew on the legitimacy and popular fascination with alternative economic arrangements such as local currencies, cooperatives and time banks. Start-up businesses and tech investors, it had been hoped, might 'scale up' such forms of economic exchange loosely characterised as collaborative or shared. In doing so, businesses might also scale up the values of reciprocity, hospitality and thrift that appeared to be associated with alternative economies.

But as noted, the promise of such non-profit alternative economies such as tool libraries has been unfulfilled, while businesses with a more ambivalent connection to 'sharing' or collaboration thrived, bringing a set of new problems, most significantly the further erosion of employment rights and the intensification of housing crises. Some of these businesses continue to use and actively promote the terminology of the 'sharing economy' and 'collaborative economy', accompanied by a significant but declining number of academics and journalists.



## Airbnb's sharing narrative

Airbnb's trajectory follows a similar path and continues to reproduce key elements of the sharing economy narrative. Between 2009 and 2015 there appeared to be great optimism about the possibility of an economic alternative to standard short-term accommodation options such as hotels. Airbnb captured some popular tropes of 'alternative' tourism, similar to the peer-to-peer free accommodation platform Couchsurfing.<sup>20</sup> Airbnb would allow travellers to 'live like a local', mediated by and benefiting a local community, thus redistributing income from tourism and nurturing cosmopolitanism.

The platform associated itself strongly with the principles of community, reciprocity and sustainability, combined with the bubbly optimism of Silicon Valley businesses and the start-up sector. Journalists, consultants and commentators imagined an win-win scenario as investment from a cash-rich technology sector scaled up an alternative vision of tourism characterised by authenticity, friendship and happenchance.

Ten years on, this story should be reappraised and its political power noted. After several failed launches, Airbnb won increasingly significant investments and scaled rapidly between 2008 and 2020. It continued to grow at a noteworthy rate, even in the year prior to Covid-19 (in 2018-2019 estimates had it increasing by 22.6%, or 656 thousand active listings<sup>21</sup>).

In September 2020 Airbnb's listed more than 5.6 million flats and houses in more than 100,000 cities and 220 countries and regions.<sup>22</sup> The company directly employs 5465 staff, rely on a network of 6680 'third-party partners' – although one-quarter of its core staff (c1800) were laid off in May 2020.<sup>23</sup> The company's net revenue in 2019 was \$4.8m, suggesting it is the second largest business in the platform economy after Uber. Similar to Uber, it is loss-making: between 2015 and 2019 it posted an average net loss of \$209m (\$674m in 2019)<sup>24</sup>.

The company went public with an IPO in December 2020, with stock doubling in value over the first week at around \$75bn.<sup>25</sup> This investor enthusiasm is in spite of the impact of Covid-19 leading to increased losses: in the nine months ending September 30 2020 the company lost \$697m.<sup>26</sup> A rapid rebound as travel restriction measures ease is widely expected.

The impact of the explosive growth of short-term lettings on towns and cities has been significant. Most affected are the urban populations which already suffer from shortages of affordable housing and those experiencing huge upswings in tourist numbers due to increased mobility in the last two decades.

Despite the pandemic's impact, there remain almost 90,000 Airbnb listings in London, 60,000 in Paris and 50,000 in New York (see Table 1), while smaller cities with similarly intense housing crises such as Berlin, Rome, Amsterdam and Barcelona have tens of thousands of listings. Many of these are 'entire homes', which can be booked for several nights over the course of the year, suggesting that they might otherwise be used for permanent housing.

In cities all over the world, housing shortages and rapid rent rises make the huge increases in Airbnb listings controversial, particularly the high numbers of entire homes and those available for much of the year. A growing number of empirical studies indicate the impact of the platform on available long-term rental options and the cost of housing, suggesting that Airbnb contributes to the displacement of long-term residents.<sup>27</sup>

Despite its impact on local housing markets, the core claim in Airbnb's sharing narrative, which continues to run through the company's promotional materials and continues to play a role in debates, is that the company allows people to 'share' parts of their homes that might otherwise not be used, or to 'share' their home when they are not able to live there. But the proportion of listings on the platform which correspond to the sharing narrative are small minorities. Those that are just single rooms,

which in Airbnb's promotional materials on 'home sharing' are central, make up fewer than one in ten listings (8%) globally.<sup>28</sup> Another 59% are *professional accommodation offers*, a figure which rises to 92% if entire home rentals and multiple room listings are included.

*Airbnb landlords tend to rent entire homes (33.2% of listings), multiple rooms (17.5%), or multiple homes (41.5%), with only 7.9% of listings single rooms.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, these estimates also mask the complex reality of regulatory evasion by many professional landlords, ranging from 'ghost hotels', private room listings that comprise many rooms in a single apartment or home, to the common creation of multiple profiles on the platform by the same business, both of which make it particularly difficult for city authorities to regulate.<sup>30</sup>*

As would be expected from a sector that is professionalised, there is a highly developed industry of services for landlords to have their properties managed by a company, relieving them of the need to clean, meet guests, exchange keys, offer guests local tips, monitor the site or photograph their properties. Services also include renovation, and even the purchase new properties for use on the platform. In Manchester, far from the biggest market even in the UK, there appear to be at least thirteen companies currently offering management services in February 2021.

It is the continuing existence of the small proportion of listings which appear to be single spare rooms held by a landlord without other properties that capture the hospitality, homeliness and economic vulnerability of some arrangements that is leveraged so effectively in Airbnb's sharing narrative, central to the business's promotional materials and its arguments in struggles around regulation.

In summary, the promise of the platform economy has not been met with many of the positive impacts anticipated. It is possible that appropriate regulatory approaches may change the picture, but there is little evidence to suggest there is a clear trend towards

Airbnb listings by city	Number of listings (room or entire home/ apartment)	Entire homes/ apartments	High availability
London	87,235	56.0%	40.4
Manchester	865	41.3%	83.8
Paris	59,881	86.8%	28.2
Berlin	22,552	47.5%	28.2
Athens	9,122	87.8%	87.4
Dublin	9,437	49.4%	27.2
Rome	29,436	64.0%	87.5
Venice	8,469	76.5%	84.0
Lisbon	22,242	74.1%	84.9
Barcelona	18,302	48.7%	67.1
Madrid	17,301	64.7%	59.0
Toronto	23,524	64.5%	44.1
Sydney	36,662	62.5%	34.0
Rio de Janeiro	35,887	71.4%	60.1
Buenos Aires	18,222	74.9%	68.5
Mexico City	17,229	48.2%	82.1*
New York City	50,378	52.1%	52.3*
San Diego	11,922	69.7%	66.3*
Cape Town	21,923	75.9%	75.0*
Beijing	25,921	59.1%	86.7*
Tokyo	10,081	64.1%	87.6*

Table 1: Data from the InsideAirbnb website February 2021. \* figure presented is for those listings available over 60 days per year, for all others figure is for listings available over 90 days per year. Entire homes and listings that show high availability are likelier to be properties which could otherwise be accommodation for permanent residents

adequate mitigation of problems. Although Airbnb has greatly facilitated people's ability to temporarily rent out a spare room of their house, which in some cases might not displace a permanent resident, and while it has allowed some people to rent their homes while travelling or living across more than one site, these are only small parts of its business.

Critics are preoccupied by the transformation of traditional housing stock into Airbnb listings that the platform appears to have encouraged, and the associated displacement of permanent

residents.<sup>31</sup> These issues overlap with concerns around the transformation of cities through the accelerated rise of tourism and problems around zoning, economic activity that serves only tourists, and problems associated with tourist and visitor lifestyles around security, noise, safety, etc, which may have knock-on effects in making local residents uncomfortable.<sup>32</sup> These concerns have led to sustained social movement activity around Airbnb, critical approaches by local government, and the beginning of some coordination among cities facing similar challenges associated with the platform.<sup>33</sup>

It is also these cities where political struggles are most visible where corporate grassroots lobbying has been most pronounced in local legitimisation efforts. Corporate grassroots lobbying is at the centre of a new set of concerns about how Airbnb and other businesses in the 'platform economy' act politically, with significant implications for urban governance, corporate power, the possibility of regulation and enforcement in relation to the new digital economy, and therefore, democracy itself.<sup>34</sup>

## What are Home Sharing Clubs for? Airbnb's Response to Regulatory Pressure

- Airbnb's mobilisation tactics and the *home-sharing club* originated in heavily resourced key regulatory struggles in San Francisco, Barcelona, and New York. Since then, numbers have grown to around 350-400 globally.
- Public facing materials from the company downplay their political function
- Yet interviews with former staff, job descriptions, and public speeches contradict these materials: clubs and their paid organisers are described and evaluated in terms of their success in building campaigns and mobilising users for favourable regulation
- Clubs hold meetings, attend and give evidence in legislative hearings, lobby officials by phone-banking, letter-writing, in-person or by open petitions, liaise with media, and convene protests.
- Home Sharing Clubs are associations of selected Airbnb landlords that are resourced, mobilised and coordinated to advocate for favourable regulation.

This is the first of four sections which deal with the extended case study of Airbnb's Home Sharing Clubs. Each section explores an important theme related to grassroots lobbying in the new digital economy. This section introduces the home-sharing club campaign model, first noting its origins in prominent conflicts in the key cities of San Francisco and Barcelona. It then clarifies the aims and purposes of clubs and organisers. Airbnb's public-facing documents on Home Sharing Clubs claim that fighting against regulation is only one of many purposes.<sup>35</sup> This section directly interrogates the misleading implication that seeking favourable regulation is not at the basis of the initiative. Two vignettes of early campaigns in San Francisco and

Barcelona show that the political purpose of Home Sharing Clubs was fundamental to their origins; and interview accounts of former Airbnb staff show that the political purpose again is overwhelmingly cited as central. Job descriptions by the company, by ex-colleagues, and public statements from key figures in government affairs and public policy, finally, also appear to contradict the claims that clubs have any serious purpose beyond the political.

### Early campaigns: the origins of Home Sharing Clubs

The early challenges to the narratives of the collaborative economy and Airbnb came in a few cities where tourism and the housing market were already politicised: San Francisco, Barcelona, New York,<sup>36</sup> and to a lesser extent Berlin, Amsterdam and Paris. It was here that Airbnb's distinctive approach to public policy was developed, which is an early indication that Home Sharing Clubs were overwhelmingly designed to be a tool for advocating for favourable regulation. The examples of San Francisco and Barcelona also offer insight into how clubs were initially developed and used in the US and Europe respectively, important because staff there and in the simultaneous early struggles in New York were involved in rolling out the policy to other states, countries and were often responsible for training staff in other contexts.

### San Francisco, 2015

In 2015 San Francisco became listed as the most expensive North American city to live in based on average rental costs.<sup>37</sup> Dwindling stocks of affordable housing led to campaigners successfully collecting sufficient signatures of residents needed to launch a referendum, 'Proposition F', which asked citizens to vote on various measures to stiffen regulations around short-term rentals including the limiting of listings where the owner is not present to 75 nights per year.

Airbnb spent over \$8m opposing the bill. The campaign hired consultants, researchers, social media specialists and eleven full-time political campaigners who had experience from the Obama

electoral campaigns.<sup>38</sup> They led a campaign to engage local users of the platform. According to the company, their team made 32000 phone calls to the 6500 Airbnb landlords in the city, several hundred of whom were persuaded to attend protests and court hearings, and claimed to have spoken to 105000 people.<sup>39</sup>

In the aftermath Chris Lehane, Airbnb's Global Head of Policy and Public Affairs (former political advisor to Bill Clinton and Al Gore) compared the political power of the company's users to the National Rifle Association. He laid out the company's plans to create 100 clubs in 2016 in the US. "We're going to use the momentum of what took place here to do what we did in San Francisco around the world," he announced, 'We'll spend whatever it takes to succeed"<sup>40</sup><sup>41</sup>



Airbnb talk up the political power of the 'Airbnb Community' in a slideshow for media in late 2015\*

## Barcelona, 2015-2016

Tourism in Barcelona increased dramatically following the 1992 Olympic Games, with the numbers of international visitors quadrupling between 2000 and 2015.<sup>42</sup> Between 2010, the year after Airbnb began listing in Barcelona, and 2014, the number of licences for apartment owners increased four-fold following the deregulation of tourist apartments in 2008. By 2016 the beds available in short-term rentals were estimated to exceed 50% of those available in hotels.<sup>43</sup> Since then, and despite local campaigns, fines, and the removal of some listings by Airbnb, the number of rentals in the city has increased by a further 50% to around 18,000.<sup>44</sup> It

is widely noted that between 2013 and 2018 average rents in Barcelona rose by over 50%,<sup>45</sup> while wages have tended towards stagnation.

The city elected former housing activist Ada Colau as mayor in 2015. By this point there were regular protests against tourism and Airbnb in Barcelona, and the company faced fines – first €30,000 in 2014 and 2016, then in the same year a further €600,000, for continuing to advertise unlicensed flats on its platform.<sup>46</sup> 'Home Sharing Clubs' became involved, including local group La Asociación Veïns i Amfitrions de Catalunya (Association of Neighbours and Hosts of Catalonia), who engaged in a series of campaigns including petitions, open letters, media statements, press releases, meetings with politicians and ministries, and protests.

One example was an open letter fly-posted in streets around the city in 2016 inviting Airbnb landlords to 'flood Barcelona town hall with FAKE DENUNCIATIONS OF HOLIDAY RENTALS, a conscious sabotage in order to disable the system promoted by the city council, and thus defend ourselves from their interference'.<sup>47</sup> Former Global Head of Community and Mobilization at Airbnb, Douglas Atkin, boasted of the group's campaigns in a speech recorded at the CMX Summit, a conference for the growing field of 'community professionals' in 2014, saying that they 'completely changed the media narrative in Barcelona and actually also in Europe'.<sup>48</sup>

One indicator of the associations' institutional recognition is that Veïns i Amfitrions were included in the newly created Council of Tourism and the City in 2016 as part of the Citizens and Neighbours category.<sup>49</sup> Many of my European interviewees also said that they had been trained by the public policy team working out of Barcelona and several American interviewees mentioned the city as having been influential in the development of the home-sharing club model.

\*Shared by Alba 2015



**3000**  
TOTAL  
Club members



40% outside of USA

Over 400 clubs worldwide



246 active 'meet-up' groups  
in October 2017  
(proxy for active clubs)



Average size: 7-9 members



Hundreds of  
community organisers

The development of grassroots lobbying campaigns since these early cases has been significant. As announced the wake of the San Francisco Proposition F campaign, the company's early experiences using grassroots methods precipitated the rolling out of city-based campaigns across North America and the rest of the world. 'Home Sharing Clubs' would be set up and mandated to do similar work in 100 US cities worldwide in the year following Proposition F – a target which the company eventually met. Since 2015 numbers of these clubs have expanded further, although great variation in the levels of activity makes some of the metrics that the company provides difficult to assess and Airbnb's recent financial report contradicts the numbers posted publicly elsewhere.

Airbnb now claims across much of its promotional materials that they have organised over 400 clubs worldwide, 40% of which are outside of the USA, with '3000 total Club members'.<sup>51</sup> This would suggest that the average size of a club is 7-9 members, underlining the impression given by examining the publicly available lists that many groups are defunct or have only one or two 'members' and have never

organised together. The real number of groups that are currently in any way operational is probably far fewer outside of contexts where the company is engaged in regulatory struggle.<sup>52</sup> The next subsection explores in more detail what Home Sharing Clubs do, and the role of community organisers.

## What are community organisers and Home Sharing Clubs for?

*I was an organiser, so my aim was to turn out people for this campaign that we were working on (Kate, West Coast US).*

How far have Home Sharing Clubs and the role of the community organiser developed since these first campaigns? In contrast to the early campaigns where Airbnb boasted openly about their political successes, the company's public facing materials now downplay their political function. Airbnb's FAQ page for Home Sharing Clubs, for example, mentions this as the second among five other purposes:

*Home Sharing Clubs are independent, host-led local organizations that drive initiatives to better their neighbourhoods. Clubs advocate for fair and*

*clear home sharing regulations in their city, share best practices around hosting and hospitality, organize community service activities, and can serve as a forum to connect those who share a passion for home sharing.<sup>53</sup>*

In some other pages and 'news items' for Home Sharing Clubs, and strikingly in their S-1 report, the political aim of the clubs is left out altogether.<sup>54</sup> Yet my research suggests that the overriding purpose of Home Sharing Clubs remains the same as in the early struggles in San Francisco and Barcelona: to resource and coordinate Airbnb landlords to advocate for favourable legislation. This is also the basis on which clubs are appraised and their success measured by Airbnb staff.

This does not mean that the clubs did nothing *but* advocate for the company, but the other activities were framed as precursors or ingredients for subsequent mobilisation in lobbying (see accounts of Frankie below).<sup>55</sup> The following quotations are typical of the interviewees and make clear the role of clubs and of community organisers, while shedding

light on why activities which were not solely political could be justified.

*I was an organiser, so my aim was to turn out people for this campaign that we were working on. We had about eight organisers. On any campaign you have people doing strategy and whatever and then people who are organisers, which are literally just going out and calling people and saying 'Hey, will I see you Tuesday?' 'Hey, can you write this letter?' 'Hey, go and meet with this City Council person'. Something like a puppet master, I don't know. But it's more sincere than that. (Kate, West Coast US)*

*So my goal was to go out and become friendly with these users and figure out ways for them to get more involved into the campaigns. Keep in mind, the more numbers and the more bodies, and the more people and voices that we have, the more that we can sit down, talk and carve out what's working with Airbnb and what's not, and just to try to make our client, Airbnb, look as good as possible (Taylor, East Coast US)*

## Airbnb Citizen

Advancing home sharing as a solution.

Airbnb Citizen is a vibrant, global movement equipped with tools for learning and advocating, from the stories of our hosts, ideas from leading thinkers, to news on the status of home sharing and ways to take action and make belonging anywhere a solution available everywhere.



### Airbnb Office of Healthy Tourism

Through the Office of Healthy Tourism, we will foster initiatives that drive economic growth in communities, empower destinations from major cities to emerging destinations, and support environmental sustainability.



### Home Sharing Clubs

Airbnb is supporting the creation of Home Sharing Clubs to help hosts come together to advocate for fair home sharing laws in their communities.



### Airbnb Open Homes

Over 25,000 people have found temporary housing thanks to hosts on Open Homes.

**7M+**  
Airbnb listings Worldwide

**100k+**  
cities with Airbnb listings

**191+**  
countries with Airbnb listings

**Q: What was the objective of your role or the aims?**

*It was dependent on what you were doing [...] my first time working for Airbnb was really focusing on small regions that need some help and it was honestly just educating the hosts about what they can do [...] So I think obviously you can be naïve and things that no company has no aims or agenda but I think in terms of the organiser my approach was just like unless it was coming up tomorrow or a month from now and we had something to prepare for why not have social engagements, why not encourage them to get to know each other more? When they time does come around at some point they'll be more likely to do something about it because they have a community to protect now.*  
*(Frankie, Latin America)*

As the excerpt from Frankie highlights, social engagements, meetups and other activities did indeed feature in descriptions of the work of building the groups, but they tended to be presented as a by-product. One interviewee, Sol (UK and Ireland), similar to Airbnb's public facing materials, explicitly downplayed the political function, emphasising the 'community building' aspect of the role, saying 'I think the primary thing is really to bring hosts together'.

Yet overwhelmingly the impression was that interviewees considered campaigns to be ultimately directed towards promoting regulatory outcomes favourable for the company. This impression is borne out when considering three other sources of information. First, the concentration of clubs organised in cities where regulatory struggles have been prominent: in contrast to most cities having one group, Barcelona was recently listed as having six groups, there were three in Berlin, four in Paris, four in New York and six in San Francisco (Airbnb Community 2018).

Second, this impression is borne out by public statements and speeches made by Chris Lehane, Global Head of Policy and Public Affairs, Douglas Atkin, Head of Community 2012-2017,

and John Baldo, Chief of Staff, Public Policy & Communications, 2015-2019, those in the company who appear to have been responsible for the policy. Thirdly, the job descriptions posted by Airbnb on its website, and those subsequently described by former Airbnb public policy and mobilisation staff who have moved on from the company, emphasise the policy focused element of the clubs and little else.

As some interviewees remarked, and as described below, it was not widely recognised by the targets of grassroots lobbying that Airbnb was supporting the landlords mobilised, meaning Home Sharing Clubs and their landlord activists were mistaken for organic initiatives. It may be that companies cultivate the ambiguity deliberately in order to benefit from the legitimacy of a supposed organic campaign or movement. The point is important for grassroots lobbying more generally, which rarely presents itself openly, and may emphasise processes which are innocuous preconditions to successfully mobilising users in anticipation of controversy.

That means that the overlaps between grassroots lobbying and these 'preconditions', for example the practices of 'community management' and 'brand communities', are areas where further research is needed. The purposes and practices that are used to distract from the political are significant for researchers and policy-makers in recognising potential corporate grassroots lobbying, but should not be taken literally as having motivated the initiatives of the businesses involved.

## Who joins Airbnb's campaigns? Recruitment, selection and exclusion

- Participation in Airbnb's political campaigns and composition of Home Sharing Clubs is carefully curated
- Professional landlords on the platform, the most controversial and accounting for a majority of listings, are excluded, apparently in order to present a more benign narrative of the company
- After an extensive search for appropriate recruits, Airbnb staff hold an intensive series of meetings and meet-ups with those who have 'good stories', building trust and gradually increasing their 'asks', which become increasingly political and involve increasing responsibility.
- Specific landlords' personal biographies or curated 'stories' are subsequently used in marketing and for court hearings and campaigns to lobby key decision makers.
- These findings contrast with Airbnb's public account of the composition of Airbnb's campaigns, which suggests an organic and highly diverse 'community' movement of Airbnb stakeholders.

This section explores the question of who becomes a member of grassroots lobbying campaigns and how, indicating the process by which associations and groups are initiated and their boundaries in terms of who is welcome. In looking at the evidence in the case of Airbnb, we test the company's claim that Home Sharing Clubs are made up of a diverse constituency of stakeholders: 'a growing network of hosts, guests, small business owners, and local community leaders'.<sup>56</sup>

While all interviewees were asked who joined clubs, none of them mentioned the membership of Airbnb guests, small business owners, or local community

leaders. Instead, Home Sharing Clubs appeared to be composed exclusively of 'hosts', Airbnb's name for its landlords. They were also not open to all landlords, but to a particular subset that were chosen for reflecting a particular portion of Airbnb's business. The key protagonists in campaigns were subsequently carefully selected from this constituency, trust with organisers established, and they were carefully trained, as described below.

## Learn More about Home Sharing Clubs

### What is a Home Sharing Club?

Home Sharing Clubs empower our global community of hosts to unite and educate their neighbors and community leaders about the cultural and economic benefits of home sharing.

### What do Home Sharing Clubs do?

Home Sharing Clubs are independent, host-led local organizations that drive initiatives to better their neighborhoods. Clubs advocate for fair and clear home sharing regulations in their city, share best practices around hosting and hospitality, organize community service activities, and can serve as a forum to connect those who share a passion for home sharing.

### How do I join my local Home Sharing Club?

Check and see if your city has an existing Club. If there is a Club in your city, check out the upcoming Club Meetups and discussions. Don't see a Club in your city? Are you interested in connecting with other local hosts in your area around a shared objective? Start a Club today.

### What does it mean to be a Club Leader?

Each Club has a Leadership Committee that works collaboratively with distinct roles and responsibilities. Sharing accountability ensures everyone has a voice at the table and leads to greater Club longevity.

### What does it mean to be a Club Member?

Although requirements for Club Membership can vary, membership often means attending monthly meetups, being a creative member of your organization, and supporting other Hosts in your town. Anyone who believes in the positive impact of home sharing is welcome to join your Club including; invited guests, small business owners, and other community leaders who want to partner with local hosts.

### How is Airbnb affiliated with Home Sharing Clubs?

These Clubs are of the hosts, by the hosts, and for the hosts! Airbnb wants to provide a global platform to make it easy for hosts who share a commitment to making their communities stronger and allow hosts to connect, organize and share.

### What type of support does Airbnb provide to Home Sharing Clubs?

Airbnb supports local Clubs by providing them with the tools they need to connect with other Hosts in the area. The Community Center platform enables hosts to organize their community online with a custom Club page and to create meetups with the Airbnb Meetup Tool.

Webpage for Airbnb's Home Sharing Clubs FAQs document

## Searching for the right landlords

Airbnb's approach to recruitment was thorough and exhaustive, according to interviewees, typically involving ringing every landlord in a city. First, organisers would invite landlords of a certain profile to a one-on-one meeting, which would ideally progress to their agreement to engage in various forms of political participation or public relations campaigns. Community organisers in nearly all cases described actively deterring the participation of landlords who had more than one Airbnb listing, or ran Airbnb businesses, in order to portray one side of the business in a way that would improve the image of the company. Analysts suggest that these landlords who were excluded are those generating by far the greatest revenue for Airbnb, with 'home-sharing' accounting for only 12.5% of revenue according to one recent study.<sup>57</sup>

### Q: Did you recruit people with more than one listing?

*'My mission was actually to keep them away'*  
(Cassandra, Southern Europe)

*I mean not really just because they're the whole reason why the city wants to legislate and by that person buying up a bunch of properties, especially maybe in low income neighbourhoods where the housing is necessary... I felt uncomfortable with them there* (Frankie, Latin America)

*We didn't seek them out and they didn't seek us out [...] There was just an understanding that we're not in the same team, but we're going to continue to allow them to rent on our platform.*  
(Annie, West Coast US)

*We didn't really want to advocate for those big property management companies, it's definitely something that is a bad look, but we weren't stopping them [using the platform] either [...] because no one wants to hear a property manager advocate, no one wants that because it looks bad!*  
(Nic, East Coast US).

*So I guess that meant if you did find people who didn't fit that profile you wouldn't follow up with them.* (Kati, Central Europe)

*'So, (laughs) we're not looking for the people who are looking to get AirBnB legalised who have a million apartments, doing it as a business.'*  
(Anthony, Mid-West)

Secondly, the work of curating a group was not simply about *filtering out* certain types of landlord, but was a creative effort. They specifically *sought out* certain types of 'stories'. When asked what kind of host or what kind of story they were looking for, it was clear that there were some implicit criteria guiding the search. Interviewees used examples of the ideal kinds of hosts: hosts who were ethnically diverse, small business owners, disproportionately worked in the culture industries (as artists, musicians, potters, etc), were economically vulnerable, were passionate about the local area, and perhaps had suffered a bereavement, disability, injury or other major life challenge.

*So when you have like local councillors and people out there saying 'Oh Airbnb's terrible', you have these hosts who become the face of campaigns and become the face of the mobilisation movement, going 'No, I'm just Dan from Leith and I just need to make a little bit of income', or 'I got laid off from my job', or 'I have a health problem', and you kind of tease out these people* (Manny, UK and Ireland).

What these groups had in common, apart from openness to the home-sharing club idea, was that they all relied on Airbnb for their income, and they only held one unit. Interviewees tended to emphasise the *local, precarious and diverse*. That diversity indicated that Airbnb staff were also looking for breadth in the stories, which would hint at a population or 'community' which the combination of stories would together evoke.

This creative work of curating and juxtaposing compelling stories is important across Airbnb's promotional material, particularly their website, several parts of which present high quality photography and vignettes of such exemplars.

Finally, there were real risks associated with inviting all and any landlord to meetups, as Brianna (West Coast) explained:

*'One thing that backfired is, so like coming from the political world, the more people I can get somewhere the better, and my first event was in <Brianna's area>, and I wanted to make a good first impression in the company, so they wanted fifteen people there. I was able to recruit about 200 hosts, and that got really out of hand really quickly because the problem is that 70% of their hatred is at city hall, but 30% is at Airbnb.'*

### The 'three date model' for activist recruitment

Public policy staff were looking for a particular kind of landlord. Yet even when they were identified, a lot of work needed to be done before hosts would willingly mobilise. Community organisers describe being initially assigned a particular area of a city, then presented with a list of names and phone numbers of Airbnb landlords. They then trawl through this list in order to collect information about possible recruits. At this point it was common to arrange to meet with those that fit a particular kind of profile in a 'one-on-one' – a meeting which is commonly used in the tradition of community organising since Saul Alinsky – and present them with a small 'ask' such as signing a petition. This would be the beginning of a 'mobilisation curve', another heuristic commonly used in the profession to depict the recruitment of activists into increasingly significant political roles.

Conversations and recruitment began in an open-ended way, but the main purpose was to 'find stories' – compelling accounts from particular kinds of landlords that could be used in public hearings, as well as PR and advertising and for talking with

the media. The process of recruiting and building Home Sharing Clubs follows a particular format of sequenced meetings that increase in terms of intimacy and the political 'asks' made by organisers. This was referred to as the 'three meeting' or 'three date' model.

*The first meeting we would bring them to our office if they were able to and we'd invite them to lunch, and just to get to know each other on a not very intimate level. This is the first, kind of like a first date, basic chit chat. "Where are you from? Where am I from? How did I get here? Are you from <city> originally? This is what we're going to be doing. I'd love to invite you to this event. It's going to be very social and low key. We're not asking anything of you right now." [...] The next meeting is most likely in their house if they are open to that, or a café near their house, in their neighbourhood.*

*We want them to feel like they're on their turf. This is where we start asking more second, third or fourth date questions. "What is your relationship with your parents like? What's the hardest thing you've been through? I never asked salaries, but it's like are you happy with your work right now? Can you make ends meet?" Part of that is reciprocity. I was very open about my situation as well. I was like "I get it. I live here. I can't make ends meet sometimes so I go on sandwiches every once in a while. We're neighbours." (Annie, West Coast)*

*You reach out to as many people as possible, you make your first ask, you make your second ask, your third ask, your fifth ask and as you're asking for a certain action, and the first one is really as basic as "Open the door, let's talk." The first one can be, "We will invite you for a drinks event," "A social networking event", "We will invite you for a coffee", maybe. Could be very little tasks and then you build that up, [...] to gain insights, to gain real stories, to gain a real understanding of who are the people who are the home sharers that we are talking about. (Sarah, Central Europe)*

*The idea was basically to move people along a curve, a mobilisation curve, that was basically you start engaging them with little things, for example they see or like a post or come to an event or something like that. Then they might become a speaker at an event or something like that and then they write a letter to the politician and then they speak to a local politician and then they basically become a host community organiser themselves at one point (Kati, Central Europe).*

These accounts were typical in highlighting a trajectory of recruitment that involved extensive personal and emotional grooming work around building 'friendships' with certain kinds of landlords, which appeared to smooth the way for the asks made by Airbnb to take on an increasingly explicitly political nature. Interviewees described a trajectory of increasingly intimate interactions with landlords which generally began with phoning individuals from Airbnb's list of its local landlords, followed by at least one 'one-on-one' meeting, then often participation in 'meetups' – meetings among more Airbnb landlords which ranged from the informal to being highly targeted around policy, all accompanied by informal text messages and phone calls.

Depending on the organiser's evaluation of the recruit, this might be followed by bigger 'asks': calling or writing to a local politician, participating in a protest or be present at public hearings, up to giving statements to the media or giving evidence at public hearings.

The role of the community organiser, like that of the quintessential 'host' in Airbnb's promotional narratives, constantly blurs the lines between friendship, community-building and business – here the business of politics. Meetups and group meetings were sometimes used for the delivery of training sessions, or presented speakers from the company. In their focus they ranged from directly about legislation, to more 'innocuous' presentations such as for example around how to improve an Airbnb landlord's property listing.

Examining the Meetup pages for Home Sharing Clubs through the Airbnb Citizen web pages makes it clear that the groups who meet outside of the context of a pressing regulatory struggle are quite varied in their topics, while for defensive campaigns things move much more quickly and do not stray far from their regulatory objectives. Taylor described a typical conversations that might precede a meetup, and its ultimate purpose:

*"Hey, Mary". "Hello, you caught me at such a good time. I've actually got two minutes to chitchat". "Perfect! Mary, do you know what's going on about Airbnb?" "Yes, honey. I'm very aware." "So, on a 1 to 10 scale, how involved with this campaign would you like to get?" 10 is actually probably host a social and go to a hearing. I'd say, "I would just be that you just sign a petition. So very minimal involvement all the way up to 10 tangible hands-on involvement."*

*So Mary agreed to have a social at her apartment [...] Then I, as the organiser, before I go to the social I will go ahead and set up what we're going to talk about, probably a presentation and then just have a structure for the evening that way that I can still get as much raw, and true information out of these people as possible. (Taylor, East Coast US)*

All these landlords, and in some cases even multi-listing landlords, would be encouraged to write to their representatives, attend hearings, and other events where the volume of complaints, the visibility of bodies in the room, etc was more important. But generally speaking, Airbnb appeared to cherry-picked the landlords who would get more involved, in order to give the most diverse possible snapshot of the very particular kind of landlord who had only one listing or was sharing their own home, via the authentic voices of these landlords themselves.

Certain Airbnb landlords were chosen by Airbnb staff as the most appropriate spokespeople for higher stakes engagement in politics. Groups were seemingly not all invited to give evidence at city

halls or local government hearings. Rather, paid community organisers described choosing certain Airbnb landlords whose stories they felt were the most compelling, by selecting among their records and their database of information, the Voter Activation Network (an electoral campaigning tool).

In sum, Home Sharing Clubs did not draw on the diversity of constituencies that Airbnb suggest compose Home Sharing Clubs, but were all landlords. In fact, as with Airbnb's promotional materials, campaigns draw only on particular kinds of landlords who would portray the company in a favourable light. The process of recruitment was highly energy intensive. Community organisers needed to gradually build trust with landlords with appropriate stories, a process which involved regular phone calls and text messages, meetings, and other arrangements which were described by many interviewees as constituting friendship. Only certain landlords with a favourable profile were subsequently called on by Airbnb for the process of dealing with public consultations and court hearings. Recruits were asked to perform increasingly political and labour intensive roles.

The question of which people who become grassroots lobbyists, or members of grassroots lobbying groups – is important because it highlights how the community or association is constructed and its differences from an organic campaign. Defenders of grassroots lobbying highlight that participants exercise their own agency in becoming involved and the way that they become involved.

Though accurate, this argument ignores the extensive search that companies make for the 'right' profile of individual with the 'right' story, and the exclusion of others or who are not followed up on who would send the 'wrong' message. It also underplays the very direct guidance, co-participation, support and influence that companies hold over the campaigns. The next section explores this support and influence for the case of Airbnb's Home Sharing Clubs.

## How is Airbnb affiliated with Home Sharing Clubs? Resources, Support and Independence

- Airbnb suggests its home sharing clubs are independent of the company.
- However, the support, resources and influence offered by Airbnb is extensive.
- Airbnb former staff describe many forms of support and influence, including protesting alongside landlords; organising many aspects of protests; political education and training; editing and rehearsing of curated 'stories'; and suggesting policy that the company wanted.
- There are examples of clubs disagreeing with Airbnb or highlighting the problem of business hosts, suggesting that sometimes campaigns did demonstrate independence. Yet these examples are presented as failures of the public policy team. The aims of clubs and the aim that they are 'independence' are contradictory priorities which Airbnb's mobilisation team struggle to negotiate.

Grassroots lobbying is primarily distinguished from citizen campaigning because of the relationship that the campaigners have with their funders and coordinators, in this case a business. That relationship matters because it relates to the authenticity of campaigns, and it is controversial in the case of Airbnb for two reasons.

First, media reports that have covered the campaigns, and some interviewees, suggest that lawmakers, media sources and the general public appear to be unaware of the backing offered by the company.

Secondly, Airbnb provides no information publicly about the level and forms of support that it offers grassroots lobbyists, strongly implying that the

relationship is unimportant for the activity of the groups. Yet many claims of former interviewees suggested that the support and influence remained pivotal for the campaigns.

*We made some signs actually, as a team, just to give out to people that wanted to hold them. We had a sign making party once and nobody showed up. Well we had a few people show up but we needed to do more, so we made some signs, they made some signs. So, after the hearing, we had a press conference and we had some people speak and they were holding the signs and all that. (Anthony, Mid-West US)*

*Q. And did you have to charter your own buses [to attend the state capital to protest] or was it just getting people on to Greyhounds, or something?*

*Chartered our own buses. They tried to make it as convenient as possible, because it's easy for people to be like, "Yes, I'll get involved," and then they find out that they've got to spend \$12 on the bus. They're like, "No." So we have to make sure we pay for that for them. (Taylor, East Coast US)*

Yet in its Home Sharing Clubs Frequently Asked Questions page, the fifth question is 'How is Airbnb affiliated with Home Sharing Clubs?' to which the short answer given is 'These Clubs are of the hosts, by the hosts, and for the hosts! Airbnb wants to provide a global platform to make it easy for hosts who share a commitment to making their communities stronger and allow hosts to connect, organize and share.'<sup>58</sup> This section unpacks the forms of support that are offered by Airbnb to participants, demonstrating that Airbnb's core claim is inconsistent with the accounts of its public policy ex-employees.

Similar to the claims made about the purpose of the clubs, this core claim is also contradicted by public statements made by senior Airbnb figures such as Douglas Atkin who have described the role of community organisers in recorded speeches (see above), the job descriptions of public policy staff themselves on professional networking sites, and

job advertisements posted by Airbnb, which make clear that clubs benefit from a significant amount of professional political training and coordination.

Home Sharing Clubs were resourced in several concrete ways. Airbnb created the conditions for mobilisation by recruiting and selecting certain landlords to form associations, as mentioned above, it then trained some of these participants in political advocacy, and then coordinated their mobilisation, strongly shaping when and where members would participate, and with what political content or claims.

Once groups of suitable landlords were chosen and established, and a sense of trust and community generated, community organisers said that they provided education. That education appeared to be about political advocacy – how to interact with lawmakers, politicians and the media. Interviewees diverged on how specific the guidance issued from the company was.

To the degree that this education was general, which some interviewees suggested it was, this may have had the indirect consequence of having taught landlords how to engage politically in a way that could be used subsequently, and around other issues, thus empowering these chosen individuals long-term.

*We basically just taught them how government works [...] it's always about making someone feel like they are empowered to make the right choice for themselves. (Inigo, West Coast US)*

*Part of it was like educating them on how they talk to city council. That's the thing we were educating them on. We weren't teaching them how to be better hosts.*

**Q: Did that involve media training as well, or was it just how to tell their stories? Did you run media training, or how to talk to the press?**

*With the media training, I would have a spreadsheet with all these hosts' stories, and we'd*

*choose four or five and hand them to the press guys, who would reach out to the hosts and set up the interview. (Brianna, West Coast US)*

## Forms of Support Airbnb Offers Home Sharing Clubs

Providing refreshments and room hire for meet-ups and team-building

- Identifying political opportunities and mobilising landlords around these

- Selecting, recruiting and building trust with suitable activist landlords

- Participating and protesting alongside landlords

- Organising logistical aspects of participation and protest;

- Providing targeted political education and training

- Editing and rehearsing of 'curated stories' in advance of key events

- Suggesting policy to clubs that the company wants

Airbnb educated a selection of its landlords on how to be effective political advocates principally in relation to short-term lettings. The company also identified the key political opportunities related to short-term rental legislation that were calculated to benefit the company: identifying and targeting relevant elites and their contact details, locating dates and times on public hearings on legislature where participation might be possible. Airbnb then mobilised and coordinated landlords around these occasions and institutions. The work also included making regular phone calls asking landlords to do these things or reminding them of their earlier commitments to do so, especially important for hearings and consultations.

Depending on the campaign, the work also involved a range of other practices, including making signs for

Airbnb landlords to hold, chartering buses so that landlords could travel for free to important hearings, and preparatory training that involved flying in Airbnb Public Policy staff from other offices to help prepare those giving testimony.

It even involved protesting alongside Airbnb landlords, although one interviewee mentioned that she had committed a faux pas early in her employment around this, having mistakenly worn her Airbnb t-shirt, whereupon: 'I was told to go and get another shirt because they didn't want them to know that people who worked at Airbnb were there' (Brianna, West Coast).

*So we scheduled training before the hearing started. So a lot of times we'll schedule trainings at, like, 7:00am or 11 O'clock on a Saturday, and we'll have breakfast and bagels, and presentations and everything else you can think of to prepare everyone for what we were going to get [...] So we will have a mock-up of the training already ready and prepared, and it's Saturday morning, they're here, we've got breakfast for them and orange juice, and coffee. (Taylor, East Coast)*

**Q: You talked a bit about the training of the people who would give their stories. What preparation was involved for the court hearing?**

*We had a run through. We had other teams actually fly in to come and help us, because we would have done the same thing if any other legislation had come up in their cities as well. So, the New York team, the DC team and some of the Miami team I think, flew in and we had the day before for run throughs. We had the people who were speaking, just making sure their stories were in order. We had a run of show. (Participant fully anonymised for confidentiality).*

Landlords selected by Airbnb organisers to speak at key hearings were trained and prepared, with several interviewees describing rehearsals for the performance of their stories in advance. The preparation was described as important

and challenging because landlords often did not initially agree with one another or Airbnb. Most interviewees said 'home-sharers' – those who fitted the profile of the clubs – were critical of professional Airbnb landlords, such that many home-sharers supported tougher regulations on them. That meant that community organisers had to marshal and coordinate the clubs to support the 'right' goals, in order not to harm the business that Airbnb received from multi-listing and entire home landlords, who are estimated to represent a significant proportion of the company's revenue.<sup>59</sup>

*The people who were renting out a single room were like "I think that people who have more than one listing shouldn't be allowed to do that, I think it should be more for the people with one individual room in their home where they could be able to make some money but not tonnes of dollars." (Nic, East Coast US).*

*It doesn't take a big stretch of the imagination to think that there are times when things don't align, on any level. Maybe the company wants one thing, the vacation rental property manager guys want another thing, the home sharers want another [...] You've got all these different actors wanting to pull things in a different direction, and it's trying to fit them all under one roof. (Sam, West Coast US)*

*The home sharing clubs a lot of times would you know, message in a way that the company didn't like sometimes. I remember one time at a city council meeting a person that the home sharing club brought said something like 'I'm a good host who does everything the right way, by the books, unlike these people who own fifteen properties.'* (Brianna, West Coast US)

It is important to highlight that examples like that of Brianna, of things going 'wrong' because of someone the club unexpectedly 'brought', and messaging going askew, highlight examples of autonomy of the landlords and the lack of overall control that Airbnb held.

Yet the moments where this happened in public appeared to be seen as somewhat disastrous, the landlords involved often presented as odd or having gone astray, and the episodes were interpreted as a failure of public policy staff. In that way, Nic described a club that temporarily 'went rogue'; Brianna described one club as having 'gone a bit awol'; while Anthony said, of one club, that they 'flipped' and 'went a little off the deep end', meaning he had to cut connections with them, ending the transfer of resources from the company. More usually, Brianna said that matters like this were best resolved by telling a line manager, who 'would then either have a higher-up talk to them or she would talk to them or something like that'.

Several interviewees mentioned their efforts in suggesting or guiding landlords towards achievable and desirable overall legislative goals for the company, the specific political goals or 'asks' that landlords would make. Airbnb public policy staffers suggested or implied to landlords what legislation they might want to push for, and connectedly, what elements their individual testimony or 'story' should include and not include.

*I will say we tried to... There was an Airbnb policy obviously, an Airbnb public affairs idea in which direction things should move, for example for <city> we proposed a capped amount of days where people are away out of their own apartments, which I think was 120 or something.* (Kati, Central Europe).

*So we do our best like in instances where our company's public policy direction doesn't align with what the users want we'll do our best to try and educate or convince or provide as much information to be able to help them align with what we think is best because obviously the people who work for the company, they have spent years and years working in public policy typically in the public policy space so they have an understanding that perhaps most users don't but obviously we also try and understand where the users are coming from to help align the messaging.* (Macy, West Coast US)

*A lot of people say stupid shit because they don't know the smart shit to say, so you'll just take their story and be like "Instead of emphasising this, why not emphasise this instead? We think that will be more powerful." And they'll just go along with it.* (Brianna, West Coast US)

In summary, there were many significant modes of support offered Home Sharing Clubs by the company. Airbnb offered political or civic education to landlords, identified political opportunities for club participation, curated or selected user stories, edited them, offered preparation and rehearsal with public policy or public relations staff, and suggested the political goals and policy that landlords would fight for, among many other services and ad-hoc forms of support and influence.

As explored in the previous section, all this was only possible through the trust, community and shared identity created by community organisers in Airbnb-organised socials, meetups, meals and one-on-one meetings, the recruitment and selection of appropriate profiles, and their original extensive trawl through company databases phone-banking the city's Airbnb landlords. On the occasions where landlords or clubs developed an alternative perspective to Airbnb, this was presented by former staff as a problem.

In the light of this information, it is surprising that the company and its former staff continue to insist that groups are 'host-led': 'Home Sharing Clubs are independent, host-led local organizations that drive initiatives to better their neighborhoods', reads the second FAQ provided by Airbnb when introducing the associations. The company sometimes neglects altogether to mention Airbnb's central involvement in the clubs, as in their S1 report.<sup>60</sup> Some interviewees repeated the claim that Home Sharing Clubs were independent, yet most also said that a goal was for them to become independent and 'to exist without Airbnb' (Alice, Western Europe), suggesting that it was an aspiration that had become treated as a definition.

There were contradictions for the paid community organisers, as Charity (Central Europe), remarked: 'Okay, so [once] there is a club how do you make sure that they are independent? It's a tricky one. As somebody who works for a company you have KPIs and you have objectives I think it's contradictory, wanting independence while you're also investing in something specific.' The evidence for the *independence* of Home Sharing Clubs, the definition of which means 'not depending on something else for its existence, validity, efficiency, operation [...] not contingent on or conditioned by anything else'<sup>61</sup> was very limited in interviewees' accounts of their work.

Yet a few Home Sharing Clubs had been set up before the global policy for creating these associations (see section 3) had been rolled out, and interviewees sometimes mentioned that there were a few examples of these 'organic' clubs. I asked Paolo (Southern Europe) whether these 'organic' clubs also had support from Airbnb.

**Q: And with the [pre-existing] club, do they have that access as well to support if they need it?**

*They are independent. This is something that they and us agreed, that it's good, but we don't sponsor them or we don't support them. It's good that they have their own voice and it's good that we – I mean we have always respected their voice, but we keep doing so.*

**Q: Why is it so important that they're independent in that way?**

*We just wanted to be respectful of the host, it's as simple as that, we are ready to help. But in the first place some time ago we feared when we talked that perhaps an external support from Airbnb could undermine the power or the legitimacy, they could be blamed by other players of being the puppet of Airbnb – I'm giving you a caricature – that they wouldn't be independent if we were supporting them [...]*

**Q: So is there a credibility or legitimacy problem with the newer groups because they're not fully independent?**

*I don't mean that. What I mean is that in the specific context of [city], when the association was created it was better, we thought it was better, it's even better.<sup>62</sup>*

All clubs were independent, but some were more independent than others. Independence appeared to represent an aspiration that was often in conflict with making sure that Home Sharing Clubs were effective in their role in fighting for regulation that the company preferred.

Grassroots lobbying does not mean that campaigners are paid to attend protests or are required to present themselves inaccurately, 'acting' feelings or holding positions that are a masquerade. Yet companies such as Airbnb exploit the space between the 'fake grassroots' of 'astroturfing', and traditional or 'organic' civil society, and benefit from the legitimacy of civic forms of participation and the forums and institutions created by the state for the public to play a very active part in democratic processes.

Landlord activists are genuine Airbnb landlords with agency, and the economic incentives that they receive from renting their property on the platform do not depend on their political participation. Yet the information that is publicly available hides a complex, highly systematic and, in the case of Airbnb, lavishly resourced role played by the company.

## Evaluating the effects of Airbnb's sponsored grassroots lobbying

- Many former employees see Airbnb's grassroots lobbying strategy as problematic because the ethos of community organising is at odds with the company's corporate goals.
- There are also concerns about insufficient public transparency about the support offered by the company; and fears that Airbnb's tactics give them further unfair political advantages over local citizen campaigns and governments.
- Other interviewees think that grassroots lobbying is an improvement on standard lobbying, or is justified by the benign nature of Airbnb or of the landlords supported.
- Several former staff consider the tactic positive because it increased participation in absolute terms in certain public political processes.

This section considers the effects of grassroots lobbying, while the next evaluates the wider evidence of these practices across the digital economy. We asked about whether Home Sharing Clubs were successful, about the differences or similarities between community organising for a company and for an NGO or political party, and whether interviewees thought similar approaches should be used more widely by businesses.

Airbnb's public facing materials, ambiguous about the purposes of Home Sharing Clubs, suggest that their effects might be to succeed in improving neighbourhoods; establishing fair and clear home sharing regulations; ensuring widespread 'best practices' around hosting and hospitality; guaranteeing vibrant community service activities; and creating a well-connected 'host' community.<sup>63</sup> Yet when community organisers were asked about the success of the clubs, they tended to only mention regulatory success and evaluations of the

potency of the political participation of landlords, and then consider the wider implications of this political aspect to Home Sharing Clubs.

On discussing these further implications of Home Sharing Clubs, several interviewees felt their work was positive and even 'noble' (Iñigo), others had misgivings about its impact on democracy (e.g. Kate and Nic), while the majority highlighted contradictions of various different sorts that suggested unease with aspects of their former roles.

### Claims about the positive effects of Airbnb's sponsorship of grassroots lobbying

There were three main claims made about the positive effects of Home Sharing Clubs that can be summarised as increasing participation in absolute terms; an improvement on other lobbying practices; or justifiable because it was done by Airbnb.

*'So in a hypothetical situation you can train someone to advocate for you and if you disagree on policy issues you can't stop them, you've empowered them and at the end of the day the net benefit or the net positive is just that somebody is more engaged' (Iñigo, West Coast US).*

*I think that [home sharing clubs] did a great job in highlighting for especially folks like you and I, but even for the general public, around the world, that these should no longer be closed door conversations. (Andrea, East Coast US)*

*A grassroots campaign is efficient only if you have, I would say, a union or a marriage between a company, and a group of people who want to defend their interests. If you have only a fake grassroots, something that a company organised by itself, only paying people who are not legitimate, to express what they have in mind, it will not be appropriate, because the truth always comes, and transparency will do the job and you will be known for doing a non-legitimate business. (Chris, Central Europe)*

*There was a little bit of astroturfing behind it. [But] from working within [electoral] political organising, there's no "pure" political organising that Airbnb is muddying up with its own money.*  
*(Brianna, West Coast)*

Annie suggested that clubs meant more people were participating in democratic processes, while she and Andrea both suggested that the participation of landlords in consultations and hearings could be interpreted as positive in terms of democracy because it was more public and transparent than closed-door lobbying. This disregarded the fact that Airbnb also participates extensively in closed-door lobbying, and there is no evidence here or elsewhere in the literature to suggest that increased grassroots lobbying reduces closed-door lobbying.<sup>64</sup>

It also disregarded the less visible aspects of Home Sharing Clubs raised by this report: the recruitment and selection of participants and stories, and the forms of support and influence held by the company. Meanwhile Chris and Iñigo contrasted Airbnb's strategy with another form of grassroots lobbying that they called astroturfing, 'fake grassroots', or a 'top-down approach' – Iñigo, interestingly, considered Uber's similar strategies to be a case of fake grassroots while Airbnb's use of them was not. Brianna said that in Airbnb's campaigns there was a 'little bit of astroturfing', but counters this with the observation that most political campaigning is resourced in some way. For some interviewees, the innocuous nature of the landlords who shared their homes, or the benign nature of Airbnb as a business, meant the practices were legitimate in spite of their being suspicious when used by other companies, or their wider ramifications for how Airbnb was regulated.

## General concerns about the effects of Airbnb's grassroots lobbying

Around a quarter of interviewees were, on the other hand, unambiguously preoccupied by the basic practices of corporate grassroots lobbying

by the company. They suggested that there was a lack of transparency that allowed Airbnb to benefit from the mistaken impression that Home Sharing Clubs were organic initiatives. They said that the resources provided to clubs led to an unfair fight between Airbnb and community activists. They also worried that the impact of the development of these techniques by the private sector in the future might detract from more altruistic causes and diminish activism overall. One, Kate, made the striking comparison to controversial methods apparently used in the election of Donald Trump: 'When the Russians hacked the 2016 US presidential elections, the way that they did it was more or less the same strategy we used at Airbnb'.

*I think, to unite people around capitalist things, like this company's bottom line, is like weaponizing people's emotions. I know it's kind of the whole business of politics, but it's weaponizing it for a financial gain [...] Airbnb really should not have been able to have a campaign like that. And it kind of raises this question of, if in a campaign, one side has every resource and is all hired guns all the time [trained political campaigners hired as community organisers], and then the other side is just random community activists, and then people are out to vote on that, that's not democracy.*  
*(Kate, West Coast US)*

*[Corporate grassroots lobbying] puts a dampener on the idea of collective organising and collective movements. [...] If I'm advocating for the right to share my home, then it's not as pressing as advocating for children not to be locked up in cages. It's a spectrum, but I think if you say "it's super important for you to come to this meeting and you can advocate for your rights" but then people aren't showing up for rallies on abortion bans and stuff like that. it's affecting the issues that are most pressing, because people are going to be less likely to put themselves out there for that, especially if it doesn't affect them.* (Nic, East Coast US)

**Q: How did politicians and the public treat these campaigns? Do you think they mistake them for organic campaigns?**

*I absolutely think so. I think if a series of people come together in your city and they've made a home-made banner, they've baked cookies, like, you name it, and they come to a town hall meeting or they show up at city hall. They present themselves as people who a) are informed and they care about this issue, and b) they have these really genuine stories as to why home-sharing should or should not be restricted in their areas. (Manny, UK and Ireland)*

### Specific concerns and tensions in the effects of Airbnb's grassroots lobbying

Finally, community organisers had to navigate various tensions in their work, which largely derived from a sense of loyalty to or identification with the landlords they worked with, sometimes seen as in conflict with Airbnb. This meant that they expressed preoccupation: positivity or enthusiasm about community organising, or the landlords they worked with, or some other aspect of their role, but concern about the wider implications of what they were doing.

Many interviewees expressed ambivalence about being an Airbnb community organiser, the role fifteen out of twenty-one interviewees had held with the company (many of whom had been promoted before leaving). This ambivalence stemmed from perceived contradictions between the practices of community organising as it is normally seen and the realities of working for Airbnb. All interviewees believed there was something positive intrinsically in community organising itself, which is commonly associated with empowerment, democratisation and the preservation or stimulation of local community, as well as, typically, themes about challenging vested interests and inequalities which were seen as incompatible with playing the role for a large company.<sup>65</sup>

Interviewees also had a very sympathetic attitude towards the landlords they were organising and befriending. When these landlords disagreed with the company or when interviewees were faced with the contradiction of working in one sense for both parties, this created a problem of split loyalties for community organisers. Many felt that the underlying positive force of community organising was at odds with the company and sometimes at odds with the purpose of achieving legislation that Airbnb wants, as Sarah (Central Europe) put it 'I think for me I don't think there is a lot of future in [corporate sponsored community organising], if you really want to speak about the real nature of community organising... it's a strong contradiction I think in the foundations of this for it to be something that lasts for a long time'.

Those contradictions might have arisen from the fact that community organising emphasises a range of practices or principles which were not followed by Airbnb's community organisers because they were incompatible with their brief: for example the emphasis of community organising on 'challenging vested interests', on the 'uphold[ing] of public trust and confidence', the commitment to 'engag[ing] everybody and anyone ensuring inclusivity', and the explicit targeting of 'injustice and inequality'.<sup>66</sup>

Secondly, and relatedly, these problems of divided loyalty were awkward to navigate with landlords and with interviewees' wider social milieux. Community organisers described finding it difficult to explain what their role was to landlords, and were sometimes asked why landlords were needed to volunteer at all. Kati (central Europe) noted that the landlords she approached in her key city had said "You should be the people talking to politicians, not us". Three interviewees said that they found it difficult to explain to their friends or family that they were community organising for a company and found the questions that followed uncomfortable.

A third tension, described in part five above, was that community organisers needed to make sure

that Home Sharing Clubs were politically effective, yet also be seen to be progressing the aspiration of Airbnb that the clubs be 'independent' – all the while avoiding that clubs go 'rogue'. This was particularly tricky. Interviewees mentioned that despite the recruits having been carefully selected, landlords often disagreed with Airbnb on matters in ways that community organisers sometimes found frustrating or difficult to manage.

For example, landlord activists had privately voiced criticisms about the rather different use of the platform by landlords with multiple properties, Airbnb's taxation arrangements, and the company's refusal to share data with local governments. These were critiques which many interviewees shared and brought up independently, but they could not openly voice them to landlords and they also needed to make sure that landlords did not publicly voice these critiques.

Several community organisers, particularly those who were more optimistic about Home Sharing Clubs, suggested that this potential for landlords to feed back into the company through their associations meant that Airbnb might be more open or accountable to its users. Macy, for example, suggested that less 'ethical' companies might simply 'pour money into lobbying only and not be interacting with users at all and not wanting to learn from users about their experiences and what is going to be best for them'. Yet participants struggled to think of examples of how the learning and listening process materially changed the way the company operated.

*I think there is a lot of power that users of platforms have if they organise together, and if they demand certain things [of the client company].*

**Q: OK, were there examples of things that they did achieve in that role?**

*I don't think so, actually. (Sarah, Central Europe)*

## Evaluations of success

Finally, we asked the public policy Airbnb staff whether community organising and grassroots lobbying were successful, and how they could measure this success. The overwhelming consensus was that it was successful, but that it was not easy to measure the specific effects of Home Sharing Clubs and their activities. Yet interviewees described legislative victories that they thought benefited from the participation of landlords: regulation that not as bad as had been hoped or which were expected and did not surface (e.g. Cassandra, Southern Europe), in other cases exactly what the company had sought (e.g. Manny, UK and Ireland), or had simply been dragged out in a way that would allow the company to continue expanding (e.g. Brianna, West Coast).<sup>67</sup>

Kate, noting the scale of resources that Airbnb had invested in these political campaigns, the pedigree of the organisers, and the degree to which their opponents were under-resourced, exclaimed in reply 'Well of course we were successful!'. Many noted that the spectacle of Airbnb landlords testifying in public hearings, when well-organised and executed, was objectively compelling whatever 'side' you were on:

*'Money is very powerful, if you can have a PAC and put money into that PAC and donate it to an elected official and that is pretty powerful but let me tell you, if you get the whole entire community to march into an alderman's office, you'll feel that. That is palpable. The alderman feels it too (Carl, Mid-West US).*

As highlighted above, although the company suggested that there were many aims of Home Sharing Clubs beyond the political, the associations did not seem to be evaluated in any terms other than their contribution to legislative success.

The overall evaluation of effects by interviewees of grassroots lobbying, in summary, were diverse. They ranged from the immediate impression or impact of the corporate manufacture of civic campaigns,

to the challenges and contradictions that Airbnb public policy staff had to manage in a sometimes very ambiguous role with conflicting objectives, to speculation on grassroots lobbying eroding the basis of civil society – themes we return to in the conclusion.

Arguments from interviewees who thought that corporate-sponsored grassroots lobbying was a good thing were made because it involved intrinsically positive practices of political empowerment and education; because it was undertaken on behalf of a relatively benign group (Airbnb landlords who tended not to have multiple listings or rent 'entire homes' on the platform); because Airbnb was a 'good' company; or because corporate grassroots lobbying was more transparent than traditional lobbying and less deceptive than astroturfing.

Those with misgivings saw a contradiction between their job and the company, highlighted the lack of transparency that clubs were not organic, worried about the 'fairness' of Airbnb-sponsored clubs out-gunning opposing groups, and thought that the model might crowd out more worthy political initiatives.

# The Airbnb Model? Current practices and future prospects of corporate grassroots lobbying

- Corporate grassroots lobbying practices are becoming increasingly important in public affairs, yet they currently operate without regulation or public awareness.
- Current platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying takes four forms: short-term *user mobilisation* such as corporate petitions or form letters; grassroots alliances; the creation of new grassroots-style '*front groups*'; and the deployment of *curated stories* of users. Airbnb's Home Sharing Clubs appear to be front groups which extensively use curated stories in their mobilisation.
- Corporate grassroots lobbying practices are now used extensively by platform businesses, including Uber, Lyft, Doordash, GetAround, Lime, Scoot, Spin, Bird and Lyft Scooters.
- There is evidence to suggest that platform economy businesses have innovated around existing corporate organising techniques (e.g. especially from tobacco, pharmaceutical and fossil fuel companies) and are rejuvenating and inspiring campaigns elsewhere (e.g. Juul, the vaping company)
- Corporate grassroots lobbying is becoming a viable career. The professionalisation of techniques such as community organising in the third sector and electoral campaigning, and the higher salaries available in the private sector, is driving the increase in the use of these practices.

This final section discusses the application of corporate grassroots lobbying across the platform economy and in other new industries. It charts the prevalence and range in forms that platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying has taken: *user*

*mobilisation, partnerships with civic associations, the creation of front groups, and curated stories, contextualising the case study of Airbnb's Home Sharing Clubs in this landscape. It notes the longer history of public affairs consultancies and similar practices, and identifies what appears to be new. It also notes the extremely favourable legal and political context: the practices of corporate grassroots lobbying are almost entirely unregulated and there is little public debate around the subject.*

Evidence suggests that the innovations of platform businesses around grassroots lobbying are inspiring campaigns elsewhere (e.g. with Juul, the vaping company). The final section uses interviewees' accounts to explore the prospects of these practices and approaches, where Airbnb are sector-leading and influential.

## Platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying: four sub-types in current practice

Airbnb's campaigning model is the most sustained and elaborate platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying strategy in the world to date. But it is not an exception. Similar techniques are being used across the new digital economy. There are already a significant number of examples of platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying that have been documented to date or which were identified in the course of carrying out this report. The practices can be grouped into four categories that are usually deployed alone but in certain cases like that of Airbnb are combined: *user mobilisation; grassroots alliances; front groups; and curated stories*. Identifying these helps us understand the different forms these practices take, how to identify them, and the main problems with each.

**User mobilisation consists of short-term mobilising initiatives that respond to specific regulatory threats most commonly using corporate petitions or coordinated campaigns to contact representatives and respond to consultations with template responses.**

Uber and Lyft both mobilise their users regularly in the context of regulatory struggles. In an early campaign in California against two bills which aimed to toughen up requirements on ride hailing services for insurance, background checks of drivers and drug and alcohol testing, Lyft employed specialist digital advocacy firm Phone2Action to help it contest the legislation.<sup>68</sup>

A similar example was Uber London's #SaveYourUber campaign petition<sup>69</sup>, initiated by UK head of Uber Tom Elvidge in November 2017 when their licence to operate was not renewed by Transport for London after the company refused to comply with safety concerns.<sup>70</sup> In Santa Monica, a criminal complaint made by the City Hall against electric scooter company Bird led to the company reacting with a push-button notification on its app to flood local lawmakers with emails of support.<sup>71</sup>

Specific qualities of platform businesses give these campaigns an edge over traditional corporate organising, in particular platforms' intensive collection of user data and the associated opportunity of directly contacting customers and clients with apps on smartphones. Specific problems with user mobilisation are around its short-term nature and the mode of contacting users: businesses with direct access to contact users monopolise the information users receive; and are likely to be soliciting political support through user data that was not gathered for this purpose, which is unethical and in some cases likely to be illegal.

**The second typical form of grassroots lobbying is the creation of grassroots alliances with civic associations which are used to legitimise the business through political participation.** For example, during the 2015 legislative struggle in California (mentioned above in relation to Lyft's employment of the Phone2Action agency), Uber partnered with Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)<sup>72</sup> by offering special promotions to the group and initiating a joint media campaign.

Uber's donations to MADD led the group to organise a letter writing campaign to the California state governor and against legislature which proposed Uber requiring commercial insurance.<sup>73</sup> A host of other examples exist from businesses across the platform economy.<sup>74</sup> While the practice overlaps with philanthropy and sponsorship practices, corporate grassroots lobbying involves expectations of reciprocation from the grassroots organisations receiving funds or in-kind donations in the form of civic political activity. A specific issue with grassroots alliances is that in subsequently campaigning for a company, the independence of partnered organisations is likely to be compromised in return for the resources donated.

**A third form of corporate grassroots lobbying used in the platform economy is the creation of front groups.** Airbnb's Home Sharing Clubs can be classified as an unusual and prominent example of front groups that is seen by lobbyists and associated industries as sector leading, also evidenced by the roles of Airbnb former staffers in the industries mentioned above. But there are many other front groups created by businesses that have or claim to have a 'grassroots' quality to them.

They include local tech lobby associations such as San Francisco Citizens Initiative for Technology and Innovation, and San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, both of whom use the language of grassroots to describe themselves yet are sponsored by industry actors.<sup>75</sup> Front groups of this sort also include the organisation Peers, now closed down but whose founding members included Airbnb's CEO Brian Chesky and former Head of Community Douglas Atkin, and a similar descendent, still operational, which calls itself Purpose.<sup>76</sup> A specific concern about front groups would be that they enable companies to directly deploy 'people power', and front groups are regularly mistaken by the media, policy-makers and public as being organic campaigns.

Finally, a fourth form employed, and about which little is still known, is mobilisation through **curated stories**. **Mobilisation through curated stories involve the selection and recruitment of businesses' users whose personal lives become deployed as discursive resources in a company's political struggles.** It involves the selection of particular kinds of users, and the co-creation with the user of a 'story' which will be used, in conjunction with other complementary stories, to be the face of a mobilisation effort to legitimise a company, usually through highlighting non-representative elements of the business.

The term 'curated storytelling' is coined by development scholar Sujatha Fernandes largely to describe how storytelling in the context of neoliberalism becomes highly utilitarian, rhetorical devices 'amplifying some voices at the expense of others'.<sup>77</sup> Curated stories are used extensively by Airbnb in and alongside its strategy of creating front groups, as is discussed above. Here, with stories deployed not only in media and PR strategies – less controversial because in these contexts they are understood by the public to be promotional strategies – but also in court hearings and personal lobbying of legislators where curated stories risk being taken on face value rather than as carefully selected and influenced users representing a very small proportion of the business's revenue.

There is evidence to suggest that the practice of curating stories as a political strategy is used increasingly across the platform economy and beyond (vaping giant Juul are known to employ it through their own grassroots lobbying strategy). Yet there is little systematic evidence about the practice as yet because of its targeted nature and the difficulty of establishing the business's role in recruiting, selecting, producing and editing the stories. The particular controversy around curated stories is that their authenticity is used deliberately to promote a narrative which may be deeply unrepresentative and hide a wider reality that may be more societally significant.

Airbnb's particular mode of combining these tactics is somewhat unusual. It is also more intensive than traditional corporate grassroots political tactics, which typically temporarily resource *existing* actors whose interests are similar to that of the business, rather than cultivating new groups.<sup>78</sup>

Generally, there are a few differences between platform economy businesses and existing practices of corporate organising techniques, but the former are developing and innovating around them rather than inventing new practices.

- Platform economy businesses, in contrast with most cases previously described in the literature, often initiate their own in-house grassroots strategies rather than using public affairs consultancies.
- Distinctively, platform businesses also tend to mobilise their own users.
- Platforms, thirdly, collect significant amounts of data about their users and often have ways of communicating with them that are convenient, intimate and powerful. These include the widespread use of push-button notifications on apps which invite smartphone users to, using the most common example, sign a petition or contact a particular political representative to 'save' the service or company that the app facilitates.

The case of Airbnb's Home Sharing Clubs is striking compared both to the history of corporate political organising, and practices used widely in industries such as tobacco and fossil fuel based energy, and to other examples of the practices used in the platform economy. Yet it is not an exception. In fact, the evidence here and below suggest it is a forerunner of increasing emphasis on intensively resourced mobilisation in corporate political strategy due to a favourable regulatory and public environment where there is currently no scrutiny of these practices, and the increasing supply of potential staff with the appropriate skills and experiences to help

businesses shape regulation through civil society organising techniques. The next two subsections explore these two points further.

### Platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying: a growing industry with little regulation

In the lobbying profession, grassroots methods are already considered 'the good, new way' of doing corporate affairs, I was told by one senior lobbyist and former Airbnb public policy head. By this he meant that the approach was increasingly recognised by lobbying professionals as more effective and, he argued, as having greater legitimacy, than traditional closed-door lobbying.

He pointed out that while grassroots lobbying had a longer history in the US, where there is a mandatory lobby register, civic mobilisation by companies is relatively new to the rest of the world, where lobbying regulation also tends to be even laxer.<sup>79</sup> "Purpose marketing" and brand communities, which frame the mobilisation of customers or other users of businesses to be important, have grown rapidly.<sup>80</sup> Grassroots lobbying and the PR and communications industries focused around community are currently 'hot'.

There is also an extremely favourable legal and political environment for the practice to continue to grow. Grassroots lobbying, as it is currently organised and practised, is a field that is almost entirely unregulated. This is the key reason why there is insufficient transparency around the practices. Slack lobbying regulations mean that it is generally not known how much companies are spending on either traditional lobbying, let alone grassroots forms, and meetings between grassroots lobbyists and politicians are also very unlikely to be public knowledge.

There is no reason why politicians would be aware of the backing their constituent has received from the company in terms of training or their initial selection as an advocate, and the general public and the media

are also likely to have difficulty evaluating what is really happening when they encounter a protest, petition or consultation where a company has prepared a 'grassroots' response.

The current lack of transparency means that public and democratic institutions risk continuing and expanding far beyond Airbnb, and beyond the platform economy. The form regulation could take, however, is successfully operational in the state of Washington, and to a lesser extent California and Canada. This case, and the work of experts in the area<sup>81</sup> suggest the parameters that lawmakers would work within in designing adequate regulation (see Conclusion).

### How and why interviewees expect grassroots lobbying to develop

Subsequent career paths of some former members of its Mobilisation teams suggested strong demand for their experiences and skills in other businesses, indicating further potential growth. Many interviewees had taken roles after leaving Airbnb where they were engaged in similar work in platform businesses like those listed above, and other 'disruptive' or controversial industries where regulatory struggles were taking place or were imminent. In other cases they had colleagues who had taken this path. Even interviewees who had moved into the third sector or electoral campaigning thought that the practices and campaigns they had been involved in with Airbnb had a corporate future outside of the company.

Businesses that interviewees mentioned using similar techniques included ride hailing services Uber, Lyft and GetAround, and electric scooter companies Lime, Scoot, Spin, Bird and Lyft Scooters, some of which are described in the typology above, some of which it is not yet known how the techniques have been deployed. Lyft was, during the time of interviews, advertising around ten new public policy positions in Spring 2019 and twelve 'community organiser' or 'community strategist' posts by February 2020, a role to 'Recruit and train

Lyft activists who will advocate for ridesharing in meetings and hearings with lawmakers, regulators as well as local media' and involving 'the use of political tactics such as advertising, in-district meetings, rallies, 1:1 meetings, etc.<sup>82</sup>

It is clear from recruitment data that at least four scooter companies: Lime, Lyft Scooters, Spin and Bird have hired for very similar positions. While ride-hailing apps are known to use these tactics, there has been little attention to scooter companies engaging seriously in grassroots lobbying. Companies other than Airbnb mainly deploy *user mobilisation* and partnerships rather than organising new *front groups*, but some also cultivate *curated stories* for public hearings and other forums.

Platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying is becoming a less unusual career path than when it was confined to public affairs consultancies. As new businesses take up these techniques, interviewees pointed out, the supply of people with skills for training the public to become advocates of campaigns sponsored by those companies continues to grow.

The use of community organising in electoral campaigns, particularly those of Barack Obama in the USA, my interviewees observed, had been an important interim step in the development of these professions in the corporate world, but the professionalisation of practices such as community organising in training programmes in the third sector also appeared to be important. This was borne out by the prior and subsequent jobs held by mobilisation staff at Airbnb, many of whom had worked for NGOs or political parties, sometimes after volunteering. Skills and practices formerly used solely in civil society have been simplified and professionalised through electoral campaigning and NGOs, creating a political repertoire and workforce now being used in the private sector.

*[Then] you've a lot of people I worked with at Airbnb who cut their teeth working on political campaigns, and it's just a question of do they*

*want to keep on working on political campaigns? Probably not. They can't really... Airbnb can only grow so much, government relations can only change so much, so they can either do what I did and move into the private sector, or they can go back to [party] campaigning, or they can go to another company and say 'Hey, you have a similar problem. Why don't I do this thing for you?' [...]. I think it's going to spread much wider as well. Who knows, maybe in three or four years you're going to have people protesting GDPR and it turns out that it's Amazon astroturfing or Google astroturfing. [...] Anybody that needs favourable regulation and has enough money to hire organisers, I think in the next five to ten years they'll start doing that. (Taylor, East Coast US)*

The influence of the campaigning public policy strategies Airbnb and others have deployed has also extended beyond digital platforms. One example is the vaping giant Juul, also based in Silicon Valley who have a controlling stake from Altria, the tobacco giant Philip Morris's parent company.

Juul have faced public backlash and regulation at the municipal and federal level over the significant numbers of under-18s in the US who use their products, possibly following extensive youth-oriented marketing.<sup>83</sup> In response to this backlash Juul hired significant numbers of community organisers, 'mobilisation managers' and other campaigning experts throughout 2019, many of whom previously worked for Airbnb, to produce a grassroots campaign – the Juul Action Network (formerly the Switch Network), apparently in order to protect its declining reputation and to shape regulation.<sup>84</sup>

The relationship between Airbnb and Juul's use of grassroots lobbying is highlighted further by the resemblance of Juul Community and until 2021 the Juul Action Network home pages to the Airbnb Citizen home pages (formerly Airbnb Community). While the Action Network pages were recently updated, Airbnb and Juul Community both include thumbnails of a diverse selection of their products'



If you're an adult smoker who's made the switch to JUUL we want to hear your story. Submissions **may** be featured on the community page which lives on [juul.co.uk/community](http://juul.co.uk/community).

### SHARE YOUR STORY

Store Locator + Register a Product ☎ Refer an Adult Smoker

**JUUL** About JUUL Our Product Our Community Shop Auto-Ship JUUL Pass

Customer Support

Why become an advocate?

The JUUL Action Network is a platform for adult smokers like you to advocate for fair and reasonable access to vapor products. Through your stories and civic actions, you have the ability to champion policies that protect access to alternatives like JUUL. Elected officials and lawmakers can only support a transition away from combustible cigarettes based on their understanding and that starts with you.

[JOIN AND ADVOCATE](#)

Resources available to advocates

- A platform to ensure your voice is heard by elected officials
- Voter resources to lookup your elected officials, candidates, and local voting rules
- Updates on local legislation and regulations affecting your vapor access
- Toolkits to take action and make a difference on vapor policies in your community

users with captions which link to their personal 'stories' – with Juul's Community page possibly also a recruitment portal for the Action network.<sup>85</sup>

In summary, Airbnb is far from an exception: platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying is changing the world of public policy. Four categories of corporate grassroots lobbying used in the platform economy reveals the range of approaches used and the significant numbers of companies employing staff to pursue them. The practices are becoming standard political tactics for fighting regulation, protecting competitive advantages, and wrong-footing the state.<sup>86</sup> They are also used to neutralise critical social movements and dominate public and civic forums.

This is explained in part by an extremely favourable regulatory environment, with no laws shaping corporate grassroots lobbying and very little public scrutiny. It is also explained by the professionalisation of civil society techniques in the NGO and electoral campaigning fields, which have created training programmes and workers with skills and experiences which are increasingly applied to the private sector.

The recent movement of staff, practices and design aesthetics from Airbnb to Juul is emblematic of the growth of a grassroots lobbying industry that is innovating rapidly and becoming important to all new businesses who face public controversy.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying is receiving significant investment and playing an increasing role in the fierce regulatory struggles around new digital businesses, all over the world. The methods are modelled on civil society, including petitions, protests, media stunts and community organising traditions that involve leveraging the 'curated stories' of users, one-to-one meetings, the 'mobilisation curve' and other civil society techniques and tactics.

Corporate-sponsored grassroots lobbying also involves using public consultations and legislative hearings designed for citizen participation, by businesses who professionally train and prepare activists for these encounters. Practices and forums which have historically been used by citizens or organic grassroots groups with few resources and little power to influence elites and change society have become an additional form of political influence for multinational companies in the new digital economy.

Community organisers<sup>87</sup>, who have often been trained by political parties or NGOs are being employed to carry out this work for businesses as well as public affairs agencies. It is imaginable that similar to sponsorship and philanthropy, companies might in some cases sponsor independent civil society organisations in a way that appears to support democratic institutions. Perhaps corporate funds could empower greater numbers to participate in public consultations, hearings or other forums, which could have subsequent benefits if participants continued to be engaged. Yet there is no evidence for this potential benefit as yet.

The companies analysed here risk undermining democratic institutions in the longer-term, by deploying these practices in order to lobby for specific favourable legislation, often to neutralise concerns from organic grassroots movements, with little transparency about the companies' purposes,

the nature or extent of their groups' funding, their membership model, or their implications. As such, they appear to entrench the political power of corporations, and may further undermine trust in democratic processes.

This report contributes to the understanding of how platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying works, its scope and scale, and its consequences, through an extended case study of the most resourced and sophisticated programme of this sort in the world so far, the political campaigns for deregulation organised by Airbnb.

The report contributes through the analysis of in-depth interviews with participants who worked on the front line of Airbnb's grassroots lobbying campaigns, and through publicly available data and documents on the topic. In doing so it was also able to interrogate the key claims made by Airbnb about their mobilisation work that largely take place through front groups called Home Sharing Clubs, the associations that the company creates and coordinates to fight for favourable regulation.

These areas correspond to key themes for understanding all forms of grassroots lobbying in the new digital economy: 1) the purpose of platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying; 2) the question of who participates and who benefits; 3) the precise relationship these campaigns have with companies who resource them; and 4) the implications and future of such approaches.

*The report finds that Airbnb's public claims concerning each of these themes are misleading.*

- The company suggests there are a range of innocuous and non-political purposes of the clubs beyond political mobilisation in order to influence public opinion and lawmakers and shapes favourable regulation. **Yet the evidence shows that the activities Airbnb, such as 'sharing best practice around hospitality' and 'serving as a forum' are generally described**

**as unimportant or are seen as precursors to recruiting, training and mobilising landlords politically in order to manufacture a targeted grassroots campaign that protects the company's existing business model.**

- Airbnb suggests that participants in campaigns are very diverse, including local community leaders, businesses and guests. **Yet the report suggests that groups are made up only of landlords, and those landlords who also represent only a small proportion of active listings: landlords who hold only one Airbnb listing or rent only a single room – the least politically contentious. Clubs are formed predominately in cities where the company faces regulatory challenges.**
- The clubs are persistently described as independent, 'of the hosts, by the hosts, and for the hosts'. **However, they are heavily resourced and coordinated by the company: from the recruitment of specific Airbnb landlords, the curating of user stories and the organisation of events where they are trained, to the selection of protest tactics used and the content of political or policy claims made by participants.**
- **The evaluation of the effects Home Sharing Clubs and other examples of platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying reveals concerns, even from former Airbnb employees.** Concerns centre on a lack of transparency, the unfair advantages accrued by corporate 'grassroots' organisations using public consultations, and wider impacts of corporate organising on civil society.<sup>88</sup> There is widespread evidence of corporate grassroots lobbying practices being carried out across the platform economy and beyond, into other controversial industries such as vaping.<sup>89</sup> Practices of platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying have taken various forms, from specific instances of user mobilisation, to the creating of partnerships with existing civil society or the creation of front groups, to the production of curated stories,

tactics which are expected by interviewees to be deployed more widely in the future.

Our findings feed into five recommendations, which circulate around ensuring transparency, safeguarding democratic institutions, and protecting and strengthening civil society. The report calls for:

- **Statutory lobbying registers that include grassroots lobbying.** It is widely recognised as important that corporate political influence over democratically elected elites is more transparent. Therefore we follow campaigners in recommending a statutory register. Funds spent on grassroots lobbying or what is sometimes called 'indirect communication' must represent a distinct category, with a spending threshold or a size of business threshold set to exclude citizen campaigns; companies must reveal their civil society 'clients'; and the register would need to include the contracting of in-house as well as consultant lobbyists. It is also crucial that the register includes categories that oblige third party entities (such as Home Sharing Clubs) who are involved in public hearings, consultations and other processes associated with democratic institutions, to list information that show their origins and sponsors.
- **Sufficient resources for municipal governments to enforce regulation.** Too often, local governments have insufficient resources to consult with their stakeholders properly and enforce regulation that pertains to platform businesses in order, in the case of short-term lettings platforms, to protect housing stocks. Policy-makers, even where housing campaigners have raised their concerns, may feel they have little choice but to adopt regulatory options proposed directly by Airbnb's Policy Tool Chest, which may conflict with these priorities.<sup>90</sup> Local governments, on which there is pressure to alleviate local housing shortages, must be given the resources and power to be able to prevent further housing stock losses through

uncontrolled continued expansion of short-term lettings, many of which might otherwise be homes for longer-term residents. More research is needed which summarises and highlights to city councils the strategies urban platforms are using to secure legislative outcomes which may not be in the regions' best interests.<sup>91</sup>

- **Records of meetings between policy-makers and grassroots lobbyists.** Thirdly, we call for public records of meetings between politicians and grassroots lobbyists whose participation depended on a funded campaign drive, such as that of Airbnb. Individuals and associations should be asked to disclose this private funding and resources in the process of accessing public servants and records of the frequency and purpose of meetings should be published, in order to help identify and differentiate corporate organising drives from the proper use of these devices and institutions.
- **Reviews of public consultations and other democratic institutions** being used by private sector grassroots lobbying initiatives in the most affected countries that focus on how democratic and judicial institutions can be better safeguarded against undue influence by corporate interests.
- **Analysis of the legality and ethics of the political use of platform data.** Lastly, we suggest that use of data for political campaigning that is gathered by platform economy companies in the course of offering services is reviewed by the Information Commissioner's Office in the UK, and equivalent entities elsewhere in the world where grassroots lobbying is being practised. Airbnb, Uber, Lyft and Juul all rely on their access to customer data for their grassroots efforts, data which was initially provided by users for different purposes and for which it is unlikely they have informed consent. According to interviewees, Airbnb subsequently collect significant data about users' personal lives in the process of 'collecting stories' and their

'grassroots' responses make use of campaigning tools designed for participation in elections, such as the Voter Activation Network (VAN). Questions need to be asked about consent in the collection of personal data and subsequent use beyond its initial purposes, in Europe using GDPR regulations, but of similar ethical significance anywhere. The use of apps to create push button notifications on smartphones that mobilise consumers to sign petitions or engage in other political activities, widely used by ride-hailing and electric scooter companies, appears to be a misuse of user data.

Airbnb recently released their IPO in mid-December 2020, during a moment of continued uncertainty about the platform's future in a context of reduced travel due to Covid-19. The early signs suggest that investors expect a rebound and rapid continued growth in the future. There is no better time for the company's interventions in public and democratic institutions to be made transparent and accountable, a change that would be in the public interest and of benefit to all stakeholders. We suggest that Airbnb and other companies making use of grassroots lobbying publicly disclose to all governments affected the resources they are using and in what forums, in the current absence of binding lobbying legislation around this area.

This would see them conform to, for example, Transparency International's responsible lobbying guidelines, which warn specifically about 'activities [...] specifically designed to confuse and conceal their true origins and beneficiaries from public decision-makers and any external observers. At the more extreme end, this includes acting through front organisations'.<sup>92</sup>

We suggest that as a minimum requirement for public and government trust, and in absence of suitable regulation that recognises the growing significance of grassroots lobbying, that platform economy businesses meet these basic guidelines in a spirit of corporate social responsibility.

'We sent the report to Airbnb before publication to ask them if they wished to send a formal response. They replied with the following:

***"We announced the creation of Host Clubs at a press conference in 2015. Host Clubs have always worked closely with our teams to advocate on behalf of the Airbnb community and we are incredibly proud of this work." Airbnb.***

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## Endnotes

1. Collier et al 2018, Thelen 2018, Aguilera et al 2019, Zuboff 2020
2. Morozov 2014; Zuboff 2020.
3. e.g. Howard 2006, Walker 2014
4. These gaps in lobbying regulation exist partly because of the relative rarity of corporate grassroots lobbying outside the US, and difficulties distinguishing extremely well-funded business-backed grassroots initiatives from organic campaigns, or those run by unions or large advocacy organisations. Such difficulties are surmountable, for example it is argued (Walker 2014: 203-4) that introducing a threshold figure, over which companies must declare their grassroots lobbying efforts, avoids this danger and brings many advantages in terms of transparency and accountability.
5. Myers 2018
6. e.g. Fournier and Lee 2009
7. Yates 2020
8. Collier et al 2018
9. Collier et al 2018; Thelen 2018, Aguilera et al 2019
10. Dauvergne and Lebaron 2014, Brown 2015
11. Brown 2015
12. Lyft Careers 2020
13. Ball 2020

<sup>14</sup> Accounts of former staff were collected using semi-structured interviews, and analysis was conducted through a process of inductively establishing patterns in the data followed classic qualitative social science protocols of identifying codes and categories. The approach followed the 'problem-based interview' (Flick 2002: 86) as a general model, generally with a simple interview guide, shared with all participants who requested it, which focused on research questions which were about understanding political participation and community-building in the new digital economy, the academic project under which this report falls. The themes covered participants' background prior to involvement in working in political mobilisation; their day-to-day experience of their work in this area; and their impressions and opinions regarding the future of these forms. Following a semi-structured model, questions were open-ended where possible, prompts were favoured over leading questions, and longer narratives were encouraged in order to allow participants to gain more control over the interview's content (Kvale 1996). Although this led to some variety, the same set of themes and questions were asked all interviewees, in order to aid comparison, rigour, and analysis. The need to verify key claims was a major priority, which meant cross-referencing interviews with other sources of data where possible, and testing these impressions by asking for 'validating details' from subsequent interviewees (Kvale 1996: 250).

Materials were analysed both manually and using qualitative

software package NVIVO as they were gathered and in a period following all data collection, in an iterative process of analysing small sections of the data for emergent themes, codes and 'core categories' which would identify patterns in the data (Glaser 1978: 93-100). This process continued until the point of 'data saturation' was reached, where a large range of countries, interviewee profiles and levels of seniority had been covered, key claims were verified, and new respondents were no longer adding new information. In reporting here, general patterns are communicated when multiple interviewees independently reported similar experiences. That means the argument in the report developed where information was cross-referenced either across multiple interviewees or multiple data sources. Where data is contradictory, ambiguous and anomalous this is indicated.

Although many interviewees explicitly wished to speak 'on record', names and identifying details of interviewees in the report were changed immediately to protect anonymity, in line with the ethical guidelines at Manchester, which meet or exceed the advice of the professional codes of ethics for sociologists in the United Kingdom, the British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice. Interviews were conducted between three months and three years after interviewees had left the company and all but one were conducted between April 2019 and October 2020; the average participant's age when leaving the company is estimated at 29. All interviewees were university-educated, thirteen held postgraduate degrees. The report also analyses documentary sources from Airbnb, newspaper reports (in particular the North American and European press in English and Spanish), job descriptions of public policy staff from publicly available advertisements, of which over 110 were collected between September 2017 and September 2020, and variably detailed summaries of roles from Airbnb public policy employees past and present based on publicly available data on professional networking sites, of around 50 in number. More general and extensive analysis was also undertaken of job openings, descriptions and roles in platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying using publicly available data from professional networking and professional association sites or social networking sites, and other platform economy business careers pages.

Finally, supplementary interviews and analysis were conducted: of city council representatives, social movement advocates and competing business lobbies in the city of Barcelona (2016-2017), an employee at a third-party consultancy who were hired to offer community services to the company (2019); and of several volunteers for Airbnb who worked to organise meet-ups for 'experience hosts' – small business owners who offer cultural activities to visitors also using the platform (2020). This supplementary work informs the analysis presented in this report but is not used directly. Its purpose was to understand better the context in which grassroots lobbying is deployed and its effects, the profession and typical career trajectories of corporate grassroots lobbyists, to appraise the extent to which platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying had developed beyond Airbnb, to contextualise the tactic in Airbnb's business model, and to gather evidence about its likely future and influence on other companies and sectors of the economy.

<sup>15</sup> Airbnb Citizen 2021a

<sup>16</sup> See for example Belk 2010, Acquier et al 2017, Katrini 2018, Netter et al 2019, and many more

- <sup>17</sup>. e.g. Botsman and Rogers 2010
- <sup>18</sup>. De Grave 2016
- <sup>19</sup>. Kessler 2015
- <sup>20</sup>. see for example Molz 2013
- <sup>21</sup>. Adamiak 2019, p12
- <sup>22</sup>. Airbnb 2020a
- <sup>23</sup>. Airbnb 2020b, p214
- <sup>24</sup>. Airbnb 2020b, p116
- <sup>25</sup>. Team 2020
- <sup>26</sup>. Airbnb 2020b, p116
- <sup>27</sup>. Arias-Sans and Quagliari-Domínguez 2016, Cocola-Gant 2016, Schäfer and Braun 2016, Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018, Yrigoy 2018, Adamiak 2019, Barron et al 2019, Cocola-Gant and Gago 2019, Wachsmuth et al 2019
- <sup>28</sup>. Adamiak 2019, p7, (other estimates in the literature vary but tend to show a similar picture)
- <sup>29</sup>. Adamiak 2019, p7. Other data, e.g. Cox and Haar 2020, show that the revenue generated by commercial listings outweighs that of home-sharing by an even greater proportion, with as much as 94% of revenue (Prague) classified as commercial.
- <sup>30</sup>. Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018, Temperton 2020
- <sup>31</sup>. see e.g. Adamiak 2019, Arias-Sans and Quagliari-Domínguez 2016, Cocola Gant 2016a, Schäfer and Braun 2016, Wachsmuth et al 2018, Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018, Yrigoy 2018, Barron et al 2019, Cocola-Gant and Gago 2019
- <sup>32</sup>. See in particular Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018, Cocola-Gant 2016, 2019, Novy and Colomb 2019. There are also concerns about taxation arrangements, unfair competition with traditional accommodation providers, discrimination on the platform, and safety and security.
- <sup>33</sup>. see Corporate Europe Observatory 2018, Aguilera et al 2019, Airbnb 2020b
- <sup>34</sup>. Aguilera et al 2019, Collier et al 2018, Thelen 2018, Van Doorn 2020, Yates 2020
- <sup>35</sup>. Airbnb Citizen 2021a
- <sup>36</sup>. The case of New York has been analysed elsewhere, see for example Seidl 2020
- <sup>37</sup>. O'Connor 2015
- <sup>38</sup>. Booth 2015
- <sup>39</sup>. Lehane 2015, in Alba 2015
- <sup>40</sup>. Alba 2015
- <sup>41</sup>. Although regulations to require the registration of listings locally were finally introduced in 2018 in the city, the evidence so far suggests mixed results apparently due to difficulty with enforcements. Researchers note 'a large and durable decrease in the number of active listings in San Francisco [...] but relatively little impact on commercial operators or frequently rented entire-home listings' (Wachsmuth et al 2019: 21). Regulation by registration seems to have been partially successful, but it is further concentrating the benefits of the platform for those who correspond least to the figure of the home-sharer.
- <sup>42</sup>. Ajuntament de Barcelona 2016
- <sup>43</sup>. Arias-Sans and Quagliari-Domínguez 2016
- <sup>44</sup>. InsideAirbnb 2021
- <sup>45</sup>. White 2019
- <sup>46</sup>. Burgen 2017
- <sup>47</sup>. Catá 2016
- <sup>48</sup>. Atkin 2014
- <sup>49</sup>. Ajuntament de Barcelona 2020
- <sup>50</sup>. Airbnb Citizen 2021b (most figures), Airbnb 2020b (the 349 clubs claim)
- <sup>51</sup>. Airbnb Citizen 2021b, although Airbnb 2020b claims 349
- <sup>52</sup>. At some point between 2019 and 2020 Airbnb stopped publicly sharing reliable lists of Home Sharing Clubs, making it both difficult for an interested potential member to join (who are still encouraged to 'find [their] Host club here') but also for researchers or journalists to examine. Previously, in October 2017 246 active meetup pages were operational, and around 140 clubs were listed, but in the November 2020 financial report the claim is that there are 349, appearing to contradict Airbnb's materials, which claim widely that there are 'over 400'. Currently, Airbnb pages offer an incomplete list of Facebook groups, many of which are not Home Sharing Clubs at all, but groups for purveyors of Airbnb 'Experiences'. There is good reason to suppose that the large functional groups remain in the cities where Airbnb has actively organised, and perhaps where it is still resourcing groups, with what documentation is available suggesting that, for example, Barcelona has six groups, there are three in Berlin, four in Paris, four in New York and six in San Francisco (Airbnb Community 2018). This overall pattern contradicts a key claim and goal that clubs are 'by the hosts' as well as 'for the hosts' – that landlord associations be self-sufficient and independent of Airbnb.
- <sup>53</sup>. Airbnb Citizen 2021a
- <sup>54</sup>. The S-1 report frames the clubs as solely about sharing best practice: 'Hosts also connect with each other to share best practices for hosting, and as of December 31, 2019, hosts had organized 349 host clubs around the world to do so'; see also 'Salteño Pride', Airbnb 2018

- <sup>55</sup>. Some ambiguity in purpose is also attributable to the variation in the circumstances in which clubs were set up which is alluded to by Annie and Frankie. The vast majority of staff time and resources used by Airbnb in creating clubs was focused on defensive campaigns, set up specifically to contest proposed laws or regulation. All interviewees but one had been employed initially and primarily on defensive campaigns, with the only exception an organiser who had initially been contracted to prepare for a defensive campaign but the company reached an agreement with the city before the group needed to be deployed.
- <sup>56</sup>. Airbnb Citizen 2021a
- <sup>57</sup>. Cox and Haar 2020, see also Adiamak 2019, Wachsmuth et al 2019
- <sup>58</sup>. Airbnb Citizen 2021a
- <sup>59</sup>. Wachsmuth 2018, Adamiak 2019
- <sup>60</sup>. Airbnb Citizen 202a, Airbnb 2020
- <sup>61</sup>. OED 2020
- <sup>62</sup>. Paolo also mentioned that Airbnb had been having conversations with the landlords in question at the time when the club was launched, which while not necessarily contradicting the claim that the club was fully organic highlights that there were clear lines of communication between the group and the company at the very beginning.
- <sup>63</sup>. Airbnb Citizen 2021a
- <sup>64</sup>. e.g. Corporate Europe Observatory 2018
- <sup>65</sup>. e.g. see Community Organisers 2020 for a UK organisation championing the approach
- <sup>66</sup>. Community Organisers 2020, 2021a, 2021b
- <sup>67</sup>. Former community organisers, interviewees and non-interviewees alike, appeared more confident in the impacts of their work in their job descriptions that were publicly available on professional networking sites. One, for example, said Airbnb recruited me to launch its public awareness campaign to challenge a bill that would harm the company's ability to operate in [Southern European city]. We succeeded in stopping the bill.', before explaining the activities they'd engaged in. Another wrote 'Efforts resulted in legislative sponsorships from pivotal members of the [city] Assembly and State Senate on pro-home sharing Bill'. Others wrote of the success they'd had in meeting organisational targets such as setting up large numbers of clubs.
- <sup>68</sup>. Said 2015
- <sup>69</sup>. Elvidge 2017
- <sup>70</sup>. Andrews 2017
- <sup>71</sup>. Manjoo 2018
- <sup>72</sup>. Kalanick and Withers 2015, cited in Rosenblat 2018
- <sup>73</sup>. Collier et al 2018
- <sup>74</sup>. Collier et al 2018, Thelen 2018, Yates 2020
- <sup>75</sup>. Meronek 2014
- <sup>76</sup>. Kamenetz 2013, Slee 2016
- <sup>77</sup>. Fernandes 2017: 5
- <sup>78</sup>. e.g. Walker 2014
- <sup>79</sup>. For a comprehensive and up to date discussion of lobbying laws worldwide, see Chari et al 2020, although they make little mention of 'indirect communication' or 'grassroots lobbying'
- <sup>80</sup>. Fournier and Lee 2009
- <sup>81</sup>. See for example Walker 2014
- <sup>82</sup>. Lyft Careers 2020a, see also Lyft Careers 2019, 2020b
- <sup>83</sup>. Belluz 2019
- <sup>84</sup>. E.g. Norcia 2019
- <sup>85</sup>. Airbnb Citizen 2021, Juul 2021
- <sup>86</sup>. Thelen 2018, Collier et al 2018
- <sup>87</sup>. There are critical differences between corporate organising and community organising. This is illustrated by examining how 'community organising' is described by third sector organisations in their materials and comparing Airbnb's practices (Community Organisers UK 2020). Corporate 'grassroots' organising practices are 1) not directed at injustices and inequality. There is 2) not a commitment to 'challenge vested interests and unjust power'. The practices are 3) not inclusive – ignoring stakeholders who are concerned about business practices and carefully selecting certain representatives for campaigns, and 4) the practices potentially endanger rather than 'uphold public trust and confidence'.
- <sup>88</sup>. Some more optimistic accounts suggest that community organising and political education might be positive forces in themselves, that grassroots lobbying is better than closed-door lobbying, or that Airbnb are a largely benign company so their use of grassroots lobbying is non-contentious. These claims as yet lack convincing empirical evidence.
- <sup>89</sup>. The implications of platform-sponsored grassroots lobbying go beyond the concerns raised by former Airbnb public policy employees. Organisations we spoke to during the production of the report raised many more concerns. What do these practices mean for struggles around gentrification and the efforts of campaigners to protect local housing stocks? How do business sponsored grassroots campaigns change the minds of legislators? What role do civil society inflected campaigns play in public understandings of a new digital economy that aggressively markets itself as involving 'sharing', 'collaboration', 'community', authenticity, and other values important in democratic societies? What impact is there on civil society and the community organising tradition that is not business-driven? Are public institutions sufficiently protected from their

use by targeted and heavily resourced activists with multinational corporate backing? Can civil society challenge business-sponsored civil society have a chance of winning? If not, is the civil organising tradition doomed? The report finds that many former employees of the company are preoccupied over these questions.

<sup>90</sup>. e.g. OECD (2013) 'Transparency and Integrity in Lobbying'

<sup>91</sup>. Alternatively, governments may embrace regulatory proposals which do not address the core potential impact of short-term lets on housing stocks, such as in Manchester. There, a short-term rental 'taskforce' is currently developing a 'charter' for good practice, apparently based on consultation with only one stakeholder - the Short Term Accommodation Association, an industry lobby group composed of public policy staff from Airbnb and other short term letting companies.

<sup>92</sup>. See Thelen 2018, Collier et al 2018, Rosenblat 2018, Aguilera et al 2019, Van Doorn 2020, Yates 2020

<sup>93</sup>. Lobbying Transparency 2015, p7, see also Transparency International Ireland 2015

