

AIRBNB: SHARING ECONOMY OR “INFORMAL” TOURISM ACCOMMODATION BUSINESS?

Saša Zupan Korže

Abstract

Purpose – Sharing economy covers a great variety of sectors, including tourism. The purpose of this paper is to discuss if Airbnb short-term home-rentals should be still understood as sharing economy.

Design – The research is focused only on Airbnb’s accommodation segment. The concept of sharing economy and the criteria for differentiation between true sharing and commercial accommodation business has been set out. It is presented, how government of Slovenia understands short-term home-rentals via Airbnb presented.

Methodology – The research started in November 2007 and was completed in March 2018. The method of content analysis of relevant secondary sources (existing scholarly research on the topic, media articles, websites publications, EU documents and Slovene regulations) was used.

Findings – There is no unified criteria to differentiate which online platform can be understood as sharing economy and which cannot. Airbnb started as a sharing-driven business model. However, due to its huge growth in the course of the consequent years and mostly illegal business of hosts, short-term home-rentals to tourists through Airbnb platform have become ‘informal’ hospitality business.

Originality of research – This research is the first systematic research on Airbnb in Slovenia. It contributes to understanding the complex economic and other issues surrounding the sharing/collaborative economy and short-term rentals of homes to tourists.

Keywords Airbnb, sharing economy, collaborative economy, technology-based business models, informal sector

INTRODUCTION

Sharing economy has attracted great deal of attention in the last few years (Heo, 2016; Schor, 2014). As a response to several problems characterizing the traditional tourism system (Dredge and Gyimothy, 2015), it has also emerged in tourism market (Heo, 2016).

The most visible forms of sharing economy began in United States. Due to expansion of platforms to other countries, sharing has become a global phenomenon. In Europe, cities have become centers of the sharing practices (Schor, 2014).

The most often mentioned representatives of sharing economy in EU are Airbnb and Uber. Airbnb and Uber platform’s explosive growth led them to regulatory and political battles (Guttentag, 2015; Schor, 2014) and legal disputes (Court of justice, 2017). Thus, Guttentag (2015) understands them as ‘informal sector’.

There is a general trend among researchers (e.g. Bootsman, 2015a; Schor, 2014) and practitioners (Rinne, 2017; Marr, 2016) to include Uber and Airbnb under the “umbrella” of sharing economy. Oskam (2018) opposes to that. Thus, there is a dilemma, which businesses or activities are truly sharing-driven business models and which are not. In this paper, we look for the answer to the research question, *can we position Airbnb as sharing economy*.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Sharing is not something new. However, in the past, sharing has been more common in working-class, poor and minority communities (Schor, 2014). With technology-based platforms in 21st century, it has become more accessible to a broader public.

The term ‘sharing economy’ entered the Oxford dictionary in 2015 (Heo, 2016; Bootsman, 2015b,) as an “economic system in which assets or services are shared between private individuals, either free or for fee, typically by means of the Internet” (Oxford dictionary, n.d.). However, due to the complexity of its phenomena it is still impossible to come up with a solid definition that reflects its common usage (Koopman et al., 2015; European Parliament Briefing, 2015; Schor, 2014;). Moreover, the picture what is sharing economy and what is not has become increasingly confusing (Bootsman, 2015b).

For Sundararajan (2016) sharing economy is a transition, a “crowd-based capitalism”, a new way of organized economic activity that may supplant the traditional corporate-centered model; it is P2P commercial exchange that blurs the line between the personal and professional”, intriguing mix of “gift “ and “market”. In EU (EC, A European agenda (2016, p. 3), the term refers to “business models where activities are facilitated by collaborative platforms that create an open marketplace for the temporary usage of goods or services often provided by private individuals”.

According to Schor (2014) sharing economy activities fall into four broad categories: recirculation of goods, utilization of durable assets, exchange of services and sharing of assets or space.

In EU documents on sharing economy, the sector consists of four P2P markets (EC, Exploratory study, 2017):

- Sharing or renting goods (e.g. Peerby);
- Sharing or renting accommodation (e.g. Airbnb);
- Sharing or hiring rides (e.g. Blablacar, Uber) and
- Hiring people to do odd jobs (e.g. Yoopies).

Bootsman (2015b) states that many terms: sharing economy, peer economy, collaborative economy and collaborative consumption are often being used interchangeably, although they mean different things (Table 1).

Table 1: Collaborative economy vs. sharing economy

Type	Explanation	Examples
collaborative economy	economic system of decentralized networks and marketplaces that unlocks the value of underused assets by matching needs and haves, in ways that bypass traditional middlemen	<i>Etsy, Kickstarter, Vandebtron, LendingClub, Quirky, Transferwise, Taskrabbit</i>
sharing economy	determines an economic system based on sharing underused assets or services, for free or for a fee, directly from individuals	<i>Airbnb, Cohealo, BlaBlaCar, JustPark, Skillshare, RelayRides, Landshare</i>

Source: Botsman, 2015b

The literature review shows that the terms ‘sharing economy’ or ‘collaborative economy’ are mostly used interchangeably. The majority of scholars and practitioners use the term ‘sharing economy’ (e.g. Zervas et al. 2016; Heo, 2016; Schor, 2014; Guttentag, 2015; Koopman et al., 2015 etc.), some operate with the term ‘collaborative economy’ (e.g. Dredge and Gyimothy, 2015). In its documents, EU uses both terms (European Parliament Briefing, 2015); although the term ‘collaborative’ prevails in its latest documents (EC, A European agenda, 2016; EC, Exploratory study, 2017).

Technology-based business models often outpace their relevant legislation and encounter issues associated with general legality or taxes, e.g. Airbnb and Uber (Guttentag, 2015). For those businesses, where substantial and increasing share of activities take place outside of the official economy (Frey and Schneider, 2000) and are unregulated by public authorities (Flodman Becker, 2004) the term ‘*informal sector*’ or ‘informal economy’ is used. Informal sector is a “system of trade or economic exchange used outside state controlled or money based transactions”. It includes barter of goods and services, mutual self-help, odd jobs, street trading, and other direct sale activities. Income generated by the informal economy is usually not recorded for taxation purposes, and is often unavailable for inclusion in gross domestic product (GDP) computations (BusinessDictionary, n.d.). Phenomenon has been discussed also under many other names: unofficial, irregular, parallel, second, underground, invisible, shadow etc. (Frey and Schneider, 2000; Guttentag, 2015).

2. METHODOLOGY

This research is focused only on the accommodation part of Airbnb’s business activity. It is a descriptive type of research, started in November 2007 and was completed in March 2018.

Data were collected from the relevant secondary sources:

- Existing scholarly researches on sharing, collaborative and informal economy;
- Media articles on Airbnb and Airbnb’ websites (Airbnb is a private corporation, which does not reveal data);
- EU documents on sharing and collaborative economy;

- Public statements of representatives of the Slovenian Government, responsible for tourism, published in daily news;
- Research on Airbnb in four European cities, presented in March 2018 in ITB Berlin.

Data were processed using the method of content analysis, description, compilation, comparison, interpretation and reasoning.

3. RESULTS

3.1. About Airbnb

Airbnb presents itself as a community that creates a world where people are – when they travel – connected to local cultures and have unique travel experiences (About us, n.d.). It is an online platform where people offer their spaces as accommodation for tourists, various experiences (workshops, concerts, arts) and market restaurants (Explore Airbnb, n.d.).

Airbnb’s community marketplace provides access to millions of unique accommodations from apartments and villas to castles and treehouses in more than 65,000 cities and 191 countries (About us, n.d.). In the accommodations sector – *homes* – the host of a space may be living there at the time of the rental, as with typical Bed&Breakfast (B&B), or may be absent (e.g. on vacation). Majority of listings are entire apartments and homes (Guttentag, 2015).

In Airbnb start-up in 2008, three co-founders rented air mattresses to guests and offered breakfast in their apartment in San Francisco (Carson, 2017). Since then, Airbnb has become the largest accommodation firm in the ‘sharing economy’ marketplace (Dogru and Pekin, 2017) and the most successful P2P platform in the field of accommodation (Gutierrez et al., 2017). Blecharczyk (2018), one of the three co-founders of Airbnb, reported on more than four million listings in his talk on Airbnb in ITB Berlin on March 8, 2018.

Airbnb has a strong backing from venture capitalists and it is highly integrated into existing economic interests (Schor, 2014). Airbnb market capitalization is valued at USD 30 billion; the company has been recently labeled as an “alternative-accommodation mega platform” (Highley, 2018).

It is estimated that more than 10 % (or even more) of all accommodation units in tourism market is offered via Airbnb. Its large ‘supply capacity’ might gradually create a substantial threat to lodging sector (Haywood et al., 2017). Hoteliers tend to see Airbnb as unfair competition because they are evading regulations (Heo, 2016). However, Airbnb insists that online home-sharing is more about expanding the tourism market than competing directly with hotels for a customer niche (Gurran and Phobbs, 2017).

The remarkable volume of Airbnb’s listings and the number of guests using Airbnb also suggests that Airbnb could become (if it has not yet become) a “disruptor” for the tourism accommodation sector (Guttentag, 2015; Dogru and Pekin, 2017). Some research

studies have already proven the negative correlation of Airbnb's penetration in hotel revenue.

Airbnb has dramatically expanded the use of traditional homes to transient hotel rooms (Schneiderman, 2014). It could be a catalyst of entrepreneurship, but some cities see it as a threat to the safety, affordability of properties and residential character of the local communities. Moreover, it is understood as a platform that fuels a black market for unsafe hotels. It bids up the prices of apartments in popular areas, city centers and the influx of out-of-town visitors might upsets the quiet longstanding residential neighborhoods (ibid.).

3.2. Airbnb's compliance with a definition of sharing economy

3.2.1. Different criteria on what is sharing economy

There is no clear demarcation between those companies and activities, which are included in the sharing economy and those that are not (European Parliament Briefing, 2015). The existing findings supports these conclusion with the following:

- There is a great diversity among activities related in 'sharing' (Schor, 2014).
- Many companies like to position themselves under the “broad umbrella” of sharing economy, because of the magnetism of innovative digital technologies, rapidly growing volume of sharing activities and the positive symbolic meaning of sharing (using, occupying, sharing something with others etc.) (Schor, 2014; European Parliament Briefing, 2015).
- Sharing economy is blurring established lines between the provider and consumer, employees and the self-employed, professional and non-professional provision of service (EC, A European Agenda, 2016).
- The participants drive their own boundaries if they are a part of the sharing economy or not (Schor, 2014). For instance, TaskRabbit is included in sharing economy, but Mechanical Turk (Amazon's online labor market) is not. Airbnb has become synonymous with the sharing economy, but traditional B&B are left out; Lyft claims to be, Uber does not (ibid.).

To solve this dilemma, the EU has come up with the following guideline: it is necessary to distinguish the entities/people who are involved in 'sharing' – if people are acting in a commercial (professional) capacity or are they acting in a private capacity (EC, Exploratory study, 2017). Not identifying those who are acting as traders implies that they may act as “hidden traders”. The main two elements for determination whether an individual is acting in a private capacity or as a trader are continuity and professional nature; those two elements have to be examined on a case-by-case basis (EC, Exploratory study, 2017). In addition, the judgement on the case-by-case basis should be put in the context of specific features of sharing economy where service providers are (should be) private individuals who offer assets or services on an occasional P2P basis. However, the fact is that micro entrepreneurs and small businesses also use sharing-driven platforms (ibid.).

EU member states use different rule to differentiate between professional services and individuals using P2P platform. The majority of them use various thresholds, developed on a sector-specific basis (e.g. level of income) (EC, A European Agenda, 2016). In short-term rentals, some cities or states use a threshold of the number of rental-days in a year. They permit home-sharing services without prior authorization or registration only for short-term home-rentals on occasional basis, e.g. up to 90 days per year. Other cities apply the rule of primary or secondary residence (EC, Exploratory study, 2017).

We conclude that the criteria for judging sharing or non-sharing nature of short-term rentals via Airbnb should be the guidelines of the EU referring to sector-specific criteria, which are combined with the commercial or private capacity of people that offer their homes using Airbnb platform.

3.2.2. Accommodation-specific criteria

Oskam (2018) came up with sector-specific criteria that comprise the guidelines of the EU presented at the end of the previous chapter. The criteria are the result of his research on short-term rentals in 2016 and 2017 in four big Airbnb accommodation markets in Europe - Amsterdam, Berlin, London and Madrid (in continuation referred to as ABLM cities). For complying the short-term home-rentals with the context of ‘sharing’ Oskam (2018) sets the following four criteria for accommodation sector:

- Types of homes;
- Days of availability of homes;
- Number of listings;
- Spatial concentration.

In 2017, the majority of listings on the Airbnb platform in ABLM cities were entire homes (over 80 %) and not rooms or shared rooms (Table 2). However, the original idea of sharing homes was understood that the guests actually co-live with the hosts in the host’s apartment. The co-founders of Airbnb actually started their business in this way in 2008 (Carson, 2016).

Schneiderman (2014) reports that the majority of night stays via Airbnb in New York comes from multi-listing hosts (hosts that list two or more properties on the Airbnb platform). In 2014, 94 % of Airbnb hosts offered at most two of their accommodation units; but the remaining 6 % of hosts dominated the platform and offered 36 % of private short-term bookings. In less than four years, those “commercial hosts” received USD 168 million (ibid.).

The research on Airbnb data in ABLM cities for 2017 revealed similar structure to that in New York. In 2017, more than a half of the revenue from short-term home-rentals through Airbnb platform in ABLM cities was gained by multi-listing hosts (Oskam, 2018): 38 % of 2017 revenues from short-term home-rentals was earned by multi-listing hosts.

Table 2: Structure of Airbnb listing of homes according to types of accommodation and revenue structure from host according to listings in ABLM cities in 2017

STRUCTURE OF AIRBNB LISTING OF HOMES		REVENUE STRUCTURE FROM HOSTS	
Home type	%	Number of listings	Revenue %
Shared room	0.3	1	46.7
Private room	17.3	2	15.3
Entire home/app	82.4	3-10	23.2
		More than 10	14.9
TOTAL	100	TOTAL	

Source: Oskam, 2018

Only one fifth of homes listed on the Airbnb platform in ABLM cities was listed less than 31 days in 2017. The listed period often exceeds two months (two thirds).

Airbnb argues that they offer accommodations in the parts of the city where there are no hotels, thus, outside the city centers. The spatial analysis in ABLM cities confirm this; however, the frequency of rented homes in city centers by far exceeds the frequency of rented homes in other neighborhoods (Oskam, 2018).

According to the above presented arguments, we follow Oskam (2018) that Airbnb combines a substitution part of commercial activities with a minority of authentic “sharers”.

3.2.3. Airbnb in Slovenia

The first listing on the Airbnb platform in Slovenia was for accommodations in Ljubljana. For the first year in 2011, Zabukovec (2017) reports on 31 short-term rentals, two years later on 151. In July 2017, the number for Ljubljana rose to 1,104 home-listings (Zabukovec, 2017) and in March 2018 to over 1.500 (Vacation rentals in Ljubljana, n.d.).

In 2017, 74 % of home listings in Ljubljana were apartments, and only 24 % private rooms. The data shows multi-listings and less than 10 % of hosts were officially registered according to the Slovene regulations; other rentals were illegal (Zabukovec, 2017).

In Slovenia, there was 1,400 hosts listed on Airbnb in 2015, a year later the number was close to 3,000 (Lončar, 2017). In 2014 and 2015 guests spent 56, 000 nights in rented homes via Airbnb, in 2016 almost three times more (164,000 nights). It was reported on EUR 2,000 of income that hosts on average received from short-term Airbnb rentals and the average stay of guest of three days (ibid.). In March 2018, hosts listed more than 5,000 accommodation units in Slovenia on the Airbnb platform (Find apartments in Slovenia, n.d.); Airbnb does not reveal the exact number.

In 2014, the hotel sector in Slovenia, apart from hostels, did not consider the Airbnb short-term home-rentals as competition (Rokavec, 2014). The situation has significantly changed during the next three years. There was a public disapproval to Airbnb business in the country particularly from the hotel sector in 2017 and a few open debates (Lončar, 2017). Slovene hoteliers consider Airbnb as a disruptor of the accommodation sector and an unfair competitor (Lončar, 2017).

Until 2016, the Slovenian government considered Airbnb as a part of sharing economy. It tried to adapt relevant accommodation-specific regulation to make short-term rentals easier and legal. The first attempt of ministries was to:

- Differentiate occasional short-term rentals (which should have been treated as a sharing economy) from professional tourist accommodation business and
- Adapt existing regulation to the new situation (STA, 2016).

After the unsuccessful trial in 2016, the government completely changed its standpoint in 2017 (Lončar, 2017). As it turned out that short-term home-rentals via Airbnb have grown into a business, the government decided *to strictly control it, if it is in line with existing regulations and if individuals or professionals pay taxes* (Lončar, 2017; MMC RTV SLO, 2017). The argument was that apart from being in someone else's apartment there is no major differences between short-term rentals of homes via Airbnb and other types of tourist accommodation rentals (Lončar, 2017). However, this solution could also be understood as a temporary one, because there are still severe issues on understanding 'sharing/collaborative economy' in the country and in the EU (Čeh, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Sharing economy has attracted a great deal of attention particularly during the last couple of years. Due the positive symbolic meaning of sharing and rapidly growing volume the concept of "sharing" has become popular among companies and individuals.

In this research, sharing economy in tourism is discussed: local residents share homes, cars and meals with tourists. Airbnb in accommodation sector and Uber in transport are in practice the most known and the most frequently mentioned representatives of sharing economy in tourism. However, the question is, are short-term home-rentals via Airbnb platform can be even understood as sharing economy.

The results of this study shows that there *is no straight answer to our research question*, if Airbnb comply with definition of sharing. The data analysis indicates that *Airbnb combines a substantial part of commercial activities with a minority of authentic "sharers"*. Firstly, the majority of listings (more than 70%) on Airbnb platform are entire apartments and not rooms. Secondly, more than half of hosts offer more than one accommodation unit and earn quite substantial revenue from short-term rentals. Thirdly, majority of hosts rents their properties on regular basis and not just occasionally. As Airbnb does not disclose hosts it is impossible directly distinguish professionals in accommodation sector on Airbnb platform from private individuals. However, the data strongly indicate that substantial part of short-term home-rentals are of commercial nature.

Furthermore, the results presents some Airbnb’s legislative challenges and conflicts between stakeholders. As short-term home-rentals in most cases do not comply with local regulation on accommodation and on hospitality, are illegal. Moreover, majority of hosts do not pay taxes, neither revenue tax nor tourist tax. From this perspective, short-term rentals via Airbnb comply with definition of “informal” economy. The experience in USA and European cities, including those in Slovenia indicates that short-term home-rentals on Airbnb platform can be treated as informal accommodation sector.

The contribution discuss only one dimension of the sharing economy and its application on the Airbnb case. It is pointed point out that sharing economy is not necessarily as different from traditional market structures as it is a convenient polygon for participants in it to avoid existing legislative frameworks, either sectoral or fiscal.

Sharing economy is a relatively new phenomenon in tourism. Although its future remains uncertain, it appears that it is here to stay. Thus, researches should monitor the way of its development and pay more attention to its impact to tourism, particularly on accommodation sector.

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Saša Zupan Korže, PhD
Vanadis Ltd
Kamnkarjeva 13, 1291 Škofljica
Phone: + 386 31 317 073
E-mail: sasa.zupan@vanadis.si