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Platformed professionalization: Labor, assets, and earning a livelihood through Airbnb

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Abstract

This paper analyses processes of professionalization on Airbnb in Berlin, exploring who is able to take part successfully in urban value creation processes facilitated by short-term rental platforms. In doing so, it intervenes in debates on platform urbanism that focus on the role of digital platforms in reconfiguring urban governance and livelihoods. Combining a political economic approach and affordance theory, I conceptualize professionalization as a particular platform logic that benefits Airbnb and hosts who are able to take part, while reinforcing existing inequalities. Drawing on eight months of fieldwork in Berlin, I show how these professionalization practices differentially affect the strategies and practices of hosts, offering benefits to some while worsening the position of others who are unable or unwilling to professionalize. As such, professionalization processes produce inequalities and power asymmetries both on and off the platform, between hosts as well as between the platform owner, platform users, and non-platform users. In a context where a growing number of city-dwellers rely on platforms to generate their livelihoods, such power shifts resulting from programmatic platform dynamics have a significant impact on who is able to benefit from platformization and thrive in a platform society.

Keywords: Platform urbanism; Airbnb; Professionalization; Uneven development; Berlin

Introduction

Airbnb¹ has rapidly grown into one of the largest short-term rental (STR) providers, with over seven million listings in more than 100,000 cities worldwide (Airbnb Newsroom, n.d.). Founded in San Francisco in 2008, the company has become well-known as one of the first digital platforms to become active in the so-called ‘sharing’ or ‘peer-to-peer economy,’ promising “to reflect our desire as human beings to connect directly and to feel a part of community larger than our individual selves, which serves a purpose far higher than simply the trading of stuff, space and talents” (Botsman, 2015). At the beginning, Airbnb offerings were simply places to stay that consisted of little more than a simple airbed and in some cases breakfast, yet over the years it has widened the scope of its listings considerably. The company has recently opened up to (boutique) hotels, which can now list their rooms on the platform, while in 2019 Airbnb acquired the last-minute accommodation provider HotelTonight and started listing some of its offerings as well.

Fierce and contentious discussion has emerged on the topic of platform-mediated STR, in both academic and public debates, highlighting how Airbnb's spectacular growth has come at a cost. One of the main issues is that Airbnb takes housing stock off the regular housing market, effectively reducing the availability of housing (Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018). Another issue concerns the transformations that a large number of STR apartments cause in neighborhoods, as ongoing and increasing touristification (Freytag and Bauder, 2018) results in the displacement of original inhabitants from neighborhoods that increasingly cater to visitors rather than local residents (Grisdale, 2019). Cities have responded with new measures to regulate or even ban Airbnb rentals (Aguilera et al., 2019; Ferreri and Sanyal, 2018; Nieuwland and Melik, 2018), but these measures have faced strong opposition from both local hosts and Airbnb's legal department (van Doorn, 2019).

In a wider sense, such online platforms have also been subject to critique. Authors such as Srnicek (2017) and Langley and Leyshon (2017) have argued that platforms have developed as new business models that primarily revolve around the extraction and use of data. They do so by acting as an intermediary between different groups of users, marketizing the relations and transactions between them, and forming the basis on which these transactions take place (Srnicek, 2017). In the meantime, they blur the boundaries between formal and informal economies, as people are forced into precarious, informal, and often illegal 'improvised entrepreneurialism' (Rossi and Wang, 2020). As cities have proven to be a particularly fertile breeding ground for platforms, the notion of 'platform urbanism' has been developed to conceptualize the reconfiguration of relations between technology, capital, and cities (Sadowski, 2020: 2). This reconfigured relationship becomes particularly visible in the case of Airbnb, which, as a 'policy entrepreneur' (van Doorn, 2019), deliberately and explicitly tries to influence urban policy-making processes. In particular, Airbnb has advocated for housing market regulations that allow homeowners and tenants to take part in 'home-sharing' practices through digital platforms.

Initial interpretations of platforms in the so-called 'sharing economy' were positive and stressed that the low entry barriers allowed anyone to join the market. Recent studies have shown, however, that the capability to create value on Airbnb is unequally distributed, suggesting that 'professional hosts' and 'professionalization' have become increasingly important on the platform (Deboosere et al., 2019; Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018). What a professional host is has been defined in terms of the number of listings they manage, the experience they have in managing these listings, and the type of listings and their year-round availability (Adamiak, 2018; Deboosere et al., 2019; Grisdale, 2019). Analyses of spatial and quantitative data on Airbnb listings and bookings have

already provided much insight into the share of such professional hosts within the STR market, have demonstrated that professionalization is an important determinant of pricing and revenue (Deboosere et al., 2019), and have shown that in some cities ‘ghost hotels’ (large portfolios of private rooms or properties bought entirely for STR use) are proliferating on Airbnb (Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018). Professional hosts, which represent an increasing share of the available listings and of the total platform revenues, are assumed to operate more like businesses than ‘regular hosts.’

While scraped quantitative and spatial data² on Airbnb have resulted in useful insights, qualitative studies have thus far been scarce. It remains unclear, for instance, how professional hosts differ from ‘regular hosts’ or home-sharers, how they operate in practice, and what it takes to become a professional host. In fact, the definition of ‘professionalization’ on Airbnb itself remains unclear. When considering professionalization, it should also be borne in mind that this particularly benefits Airbnb as a company, harnessing its power over the platform and its users. In a society where platforms are emerging as a central institutional form, and which are (re-)organizing the relations between markets, citizens, and the state (Van Dijck et al., 2018; van Doorn, 2019), such shifts of platform power resulting from programmatic platform dynamics might have tremendous consequences regarding who is able to benefit from platformization and thrive in a platform economy.

Instead of focusing on professional hosts as a category and professionalization as a given, I suggest that it is more fruitful to unpack *processes of professionalization*, and to conceptualize them as a distinct platform logic (Andersson Schwarz, 2017) that creates and maintains unequal power relations both between hosts themselves, and between platform owners and hosts. In this paper, I seek to contribute to our understanding of platform-mediated STR, and platformization in general, by providing an in-depth account of processes of professionalization on Airbnb, based on long-term qualitative research in Berlin. As I will show, some of these processes are socio-technically assembled by the platform, while others are not facilitated or are even discouraged by the platform. Moreover, professionalization, as engineered by the platform, is constantly negotiated and contested by diverse hosts in different (regulatory) contexts, resulting in variegated outcomes. In practice, professionalization is not necessarily a successful or tenable strategy for many hosts; closer scrutiny of actually existing processes of professionalization shows a more complex and ambiguous picture of both failure and success.

In what follows, I first present an overview of the relevant literature on the professionalization of STR, followed by an explanation of how I conceptualize processes of professionalization as a

particular platform logic. After a brief methodological discussion, I present my analysis of findings based on fieldwork in Berlin, focusing on the stories of three different hosts in the city, who represent divergent cases of precarious, disrupted, and privileged professionalization. I discuss what these cases can tell us about platform urbanism and platform-mediated value creation, concluding with suggestions for further research.

STR and processes of professionalization

In this section, I outline existing approaches to STR professionalization. I argue that a binary distinction between home-sharers and professional hosts is problematic. Instead, I suggest that it might be more fruitful to look at processes of professionalization as a particular platform logic.

What professional hosts are and what they do has been described in a series of studies using scraped Airbnb data. These studies generally construct indicators to measure professionalization by focusing on how the characteristics of hosts and rental properties affect listing revenue. The most frequently mentioned indicator is ‘multi-listing.’ Li et al. (2015), for example, define “professional hosts as those who offer two or more unique units on Airbnb” (7). Similarly, Gibbs et al. (2018) designate hosts as professional “if they ha[ve] two or more active listings” (50), Dann et al. (2019) regard professional hosts as “those who offer more than one listing” (451), and Deboosere et al. (2019) find that hosts with 10 or more listings are even more ‘successful,’ i.e. they bring in more revenue per listing.

Other proposed indicators of professionalization have been the renting out of entire apartments (as opposed to rooms) and high yearly availability. For Ioannides et al. (2018), for example, “[p]rofessional Airbnbs’ refers to entire homes/apartments, controlled by owners with multiple listings (two or more), available for over 60 days per year” (10-11). Wachsmuth et al. (2018) expand the definition of professionalization to include what they call “commercial operators with ‘ghost hotels’” (2). Deboosere et al. (2019) further expand these indicators by suggesting the inclusion of ‘Superhost’ status,³ the number of reviews per listing, and whether Instant Booking is allowed.⁴ Deboosere et al. (2019) conclude that “hosts who treat their listings as de facto hotels rather than opportunities for part-time ‘home sharing’ are considerably more successful in the Airbnb marketplace” (152-153).

While the distinction between ‘home-sharers’ and commercial operators thus remains of central concern, Kadi et al. (2019) argue that a binary understanding of these groups does not hold. Since definitions of professional hosting generally include entire apartments only, rooms rented on Airbnb would be categorized as home-sharing listings. However, based on empirical material from

Vienna, the authors find that these rooms are in some cases also rented out using ‘commercialized provision practices,’ including year-round availability. They conclude that “commercial provision of Airbnb homes may thus not only be a strategy for large-scale landlords . . . , but also be pursued by small-scale entrepreneurs or amateur landlords” (ibid.: 17). In this sense, professionalization in the end has to do with the aim of making as much profit as possible.⁵

The consensus seems to be that professionalization amounts to a spatial and temporal expansion of ‘hosting’: the rental of multiple, often entire, apartments that are available all year round, in some cases facilitated by an intermediary. Limited attention has been paid to the question of how hosts achieve professionalization in practice.⁶ What are the conditions of possibility for professionalization and how do they affect inequalities in access to value creation? Moreover, existing accounts based on quantitative data are developed on the basis of the information that ends up on the platform. Excluded are the trajectories that lead to these spaces ending up on the platform; the stories of rentals that were taken off the platform; and potential hosts who were ultimately unable to join the platform.

While Airbnb rentals are closely tied to the housing market, in this paper I focus on the labor involved in hosting. It is clear that professionalization increases listing revenue, but it is unclear how processes of professionalization transform the various types of labor involved in hosting, and perhaps require new forms of labor. After all, hosting on Airbnb does not just require a home or space to rent out; it involves emotional and affective labor, from both hosts and neighborhood residents (Knaus, 2018; Roelofsen, 2018; Spangler, 2020), as well as physical (e.g. cleaning) and digital labor. In order to understand who is able to benefit from platforms and who is excluded, it is important to see which types of waged or unwaged labor are (de)valued and which types can be automated and taken over by algorithms (cf. Fields and Rogers, 2019).

In order to develop a more processual and multifaceted understanding of professionalization, I suggest looking at *processes of professionalization* as a particular platform logic. The concept of platform logic is derived from Andersson Schwarz (2017), who conceptualizes it as “a twofold logic of micro-level technocentric control and macro-level geopolitical domination, while at the same time having a range of generative outcomes, arising between these two levels” (376). In studying platforms, he suggests, micro-level perspectives on platform practices should be combined with macro-level perspectives on the political economy of platform owners, “simultaneously acknowledging *the technical capacity of unyielding local control* and its consequential *concentrations of global dominance by a handful of corporate actors*” (ibid.: 378, emphasis in original).

I depart from Andersson Schwartz's notion of 'unyielding local control' on a micro level and instead take a more dynamic, non-deterministic approach to platforms' power over users. Platforms "*set the stage for actions to unfold*" (Bratton, 2015: 47, emphasis in original) without fully determining what these actions should look like. In this sense, affordance theory comes in useful to account for the technical aspects of the platform in relation to users. Affordance theory is an approach derived from Science and Technology Studies that aims to theorize technologies and their users in conjunction. Accordingly, affordances are defined as "the 'multifaceted relational structure[s]... between an object/technology and the use that enables or constrains potential behavioural outcomes in a particular context'" (Evans et al., 2017: 36). Thus, they are more than technical features per se; rather, affordances emerge in the *relation* between a technical artifact and its user. Depending on the user's capabilities, knowledge, and resources, affordances can take multiple forms and strengths. To stress this, Davis and Chouinard (2016) explore a series of interrelated mechanisms of affordance, answering how artefacts afford: they might *allow*, request, encourage, demand, discourage, or refuse specific behavior in particular contexts. Moreover, over time affordances might shift: a platform may allow its users to do something at first, then later *encourage* them to do it, and eventually *demand* that users behave in this way. If we follow the analogy of platforms setting 'the stage for actions to unfold,' then affordance theory might help us to understand what the stage looks like, who is allowed to enter the stage and under what circumstances, and what roles are they able to play.

In the case of Airbnb, this platform logic hints at the interplay between technical features and tools, such as the Superhost status discussed above, and the political-economic interests of Airbnb as a company. By meeting particular targets, hosts can attain Superhost status, resulting in particular rights and privileges being bestowed on them. While hosts are not obliged to meet these targets, these rewards clearly encourage hosts to work to meet them. Meeting these targets directly benefits Airbnb, since the Superhost status results in higher nightly rates for hosts and higher service fees transferred to Airbnb. Similarly, I suggest that professionalization processes are partially engineered by the Airbnb platform and tied to its business model, though they are also always shaped by differentially situated users embedded in local spatio-historical contexts. By conceptualizing professionalization as a platform logic, I aim to understand "the operation of power and politics accompanying the integration of platforms into everyday life" (Fields and Rogers, 2019: 6).

Methodology

To explore how professionalization actually takes place on Airbnb, data was gathered during eight months of fieldwork in Berlin. Berlin is an excellent site for exploring actually existing processes of professionalization, as the conditions are favorable for both ‘home-sharers’ and ‘professional hosts.’ On the one hand, Berlin’s population has a relatively low income compared to the rest of Germany, and even more so compared to other European capitals (Bernt et al., 2014). Within the city, large income inequalities and high unemployment rates exist, making home-sharing potentially attractive to large shares of the population. On the other hand, housing is under severe pressure, with demand for housing vastly outnumbering supply. As a popular destination for both travelers and longer-term residents from both Germany and abroad (Novy, 2018), rents have increased drastically over the past decades. The rent gap in the city (Smith, 1987) is large due to relatively low housing costs in the past, strong population growth, and the recent influx of a large amount of investment capital (Elias, 2017). Even though measures are currently being taken to release pressure on the rental market,⁷ Berlin is still a popular place to invest in real estate (Collinson, 2018), potentially making it an attractive market for professional hosting as well. At the same time, regulation of the STR market is strong. STR of entire homes was banned citywide between 2016 and 2018. While STR was allowed again from 2018, strict conditions apply and large fines of up to €500,000 were introduced for offenders (Paul, 2018). This makes Berlin an excellent test case for examining how professionalization takes place under conditions of strict regulation.

During the fieldwork period, I conducted 35 in-depth interviews with past and current Airbnb hosts, home-sharers and multi-listers, and with companies offering services catered to Airbnb hosts. This method was chosen in order to gain insight into respondents’ relations to platforms, and how they reflect upon them (Rinaldo and Guhin, 2019). Interviews were held in either English or German and focused on respondents’ backgrounds, their motivations to use the Airbnb platform, how their income from Airbnb related to further sources of income, and their views on ‘good hosting.’ While a topic list was used to ensure that these topics were touched upon, the interviews were loosely structured and open-ended to leave space for unexpected topics and participants’ own concerns. In addition to the interviews, I participated in gatherings of Airbnb hosts, neighborhood events, and town hall meetings. To assure anonymity, pseudonyms are used and some details that might allow for the identification of respondents, including occupation and neighborhood, have been changed or withheld.⁸

Further data was gathered through a variant of the ‘walkthrough method’ in order to get acquainted with the features and functionalities of the Airbnb platform. This method is “a way of engaging

directly with an app’s interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences” (Light et al., 2018: 882). I used it to get a sense of the Airbnb platform’s affordances by directly interacting with the platform, both using a mobile device and through the web interface. Airbnb’s online Help Center for hosts,⁹ as well as the Community Center,¹⁰ were consulted to get a better understanding of how particular functionalities work and how they are perceived by hosts.

Modes of professionalization

This section presents three stories of diverse hosts in Berlin who took part in one or more processes of professionalization. The three individual trajectories detailed here exemplify broader patterns, demonstrating how hosts’ attempts at professionalization can lead to highly divergent outcomes. The first trajectory, focusing on the stories of Irena and Thomas, involves contrasting forms of precarious and privileged professionalization: Irena has been able to professionalize as a host, but under conditions of high risk and with insecure and uncertain outcomes, while Thomas, who is not involved in the daily work of hosting, is able to benefit from previously accumulated capital. The second trajectory focuses on Johannes, whose company acts as an intermediary in support of real estate owners. By minimizing asset ownership, collecting data, and using software to manage his business, he mirrors the strategies of lean platforms, which are characterized by their “attempt to reduce their ownership of assets to a minimum and ... profit by reducing costs as much as possible” (Srnicek, 2017: 49–50). The final trajectory looks at the case of Elli, which can be characterized as one of disrupted professionalization: she initially sought to make a living by renting a few apartments, but was unable to continue her business due to changes in her personal circumstances and local regulations. Together, these three trajectories highlight how professionalization should be understood as a set of dynamic and multi-faceted processes.

Precarious and privileged professionalization

I first met Thomas at an event for Airbnb hosts. After we had chatted for a short while, I asked if I could interview him about being an Airbnb host. He immediately introduced me to Irena, saying that she was the one who actually “does the work.” Their contrasting trajectories and situations represent cases of precarious and privileged professionalization. As I will show below, central to this contrast are the resources they were able to bring to the platform, the work they had to do to be a host, and the present and future returns they could expect.

Both Irena and Thomas were from a neighborhood in former East Berlin. Irena worked as a photographer and described her life as “almost not structured, no regular things. Just Airbnb, that

makes really a regular thing.” She was receiving social security, an amount of €700 a month after rent, and had an irregular income from her work as a photographer. In 2014, she started renting out a room in her own apartment through Airbnb and began working for several other hosts, including Thomas, where she did most of the hosting work, including cleaning, communication, and guest check-in. Thomas himself owned a small construction company, a few dozen regular apartments in Berlin, and two spaces that he rented out on Airbnb. When I asked him if he regarded himself as an Airbnb host, he hesitated and responded that he was more of a property manager (*Objektverwalter*); all the services (*Dienstleistung*) he “gives out to others” such as Irena.

For Irena, things were going well at that moment, but she was not where she wanted to be. She returned to her aspirations regularly:

You know, it is just so beautiful, what the people are writing about the experience they have with me. So I’m really good in that, I’m really really good in that. So that’s the reason why I’d love to have more space, to be the queen of my house, you know, the arty queeny, and welcoming the people, and give them just a good feeling. I’m really good in that. I think if I would do it more in the professional way, even more professional, having a bigger space and all that, I could create an income just out of that, and I could leave my social money for example.

I was struck by the contrast between Irena’s and Thomas’ perspectives on Airbnb. Irena wanted to host in “the professional way, even more professional,” but felt like she was unable to achieve this. The way she took care of guests was highly valued, as evidenced by their reviews and her Superhost status, but she was not able to capture this value in monetary terms. Taking the next step to bring her hospitality to another level was unattainable for her, as she did not have a space of her own. She envied people like Thomas and expressed her frustration about having to work for them: “I just want to use my potential just for myself. I don’t want to provide it for others.”

Thomas owned multiple spaces, some of which he had been able to finance by taking out loans, using the apartments he already had as collateral (the banks he approached did not recognize holiday apartments as a safe investment and therefore would not provide a commercial loan for such a purpose without such collateral). Thomas used these loans to acquire spaces that he turned into Airbnb apartments. He regarded this as an investment in the middle to long term, with the plan of refinancing with his own capital and getting rid of the loans. In the long run, he hoped that the apartments would deliver him a source of “passive income.” Crucial to enabling this was Airbnb’s co-hosting system, which allowed Thomas to have Irena work for him as a host and thus he could distance himself as the property owner from the work of hosting. This also allowed him to scale up and manage multiple apartments at a distance. Professionalization in Thomas’ case was privileged as he brought resources – capital – to the platform that allowed him to distance himself

from the actual hosting, while still generating for him a passive income. By renting out his apartments through Airbnb, he was able to not simply speculate on the future value increases of his property, but also to turn them into assets that generated a steady stream of income (Birch and Muniesa, 2020).

Irena “does the work,” as Thomas put it, and filled in the distance that Thomas took from hosting. This hints at the ambiguity of the notion of ‘host’ on Airbnb, which in practice might refer to persons with different roles. Airbnb’s help center reveals that there are in fact ‘primary hosts,’ ‘listing admins or owners,’¹¹ and ‘co-hosts’ (Airbnb Help Center, n.d.). Co-hosts are persons who “help listing owners take care of their home and guests” (ibid.). What this help consists of varies: in some cases, a co-host might only clean apartments, while in others they might act as the primary host and take on all the hosting labor. The crucial difference with listing owners is that the latter have access to the payout method and actual payout, while a co-host does not. While the question of what a host exactly is might seem trivial, the ambiguity is crucial to processes of professionalization, as it allows the owner of a space to outsource hosting labor and have somebody else run the STR.¹² This means that Airbnb is no longer only a home rental platform; it also becomes a platform for managing the labor required to rent out these homes.

Another stark difference between Irena and Thomas was their capability to navigate risk. Renting out through Airbnb is risky. The relative novelty of platform-mediated STR, combined with digital platforms’ – including Airbnb’s – deliberate efforts to influence policies to their own benefit, mean that regulations are under constant development. This may mean that particular rentals might be banned or severely limited at a certain moment, as happened in Berlin in 2016¹³ and in Amsterdam after a ruling from Council of State in early 2020.¹⁴ This happened to one of Thomas’ apartments, but he had been able to sell the apartment and acquire another space. Unlike the previous apartment, the new space was zoned as a commercial space and not as a home, which meant that the new regulations did not apply. As such, hosts who manage a larger number of apartments that they are not personally attached to are much more likely to be able to circumvent the risks of new regulations ruling their activities illegal. If Irena were to get caught illegally subletting her apartment, she would not only receive a fine but would also lose her social security, her home, and her source of income. Her work was not only poorly paid, but her situation was also highly precarious.

Platformed professionalization

Johannes – like Irena – did not own real estate or capital, but took part in a different process of professionalization that I call platformed professionalization, enabled by typical platformization strategies and platform affordances including datafication, upscaling, and minimizing asset ownership. Johannes' company functioned as an intermediary: in return for a 25% cut of the rental income generated, the company offered complete hosting services to property owners. For Johannes, this construction meant that he could operate similarly to lean platforms. Like those, crucial to understanding Johannes' business is “that they do own the most important asset: the platform of software and data analytics” (Srnicek, 2017: 49–50). Johannes obviously did not own the Airbnb platform, but used diverse, interconnected software tools to gather, store, and analyze data. These tools relied on Airbnb's Application Programming Interface (API). APIs are crucial element for platforms as they allow users to access and edit data in Airbnb's database in an automated and programmable fashion. As such, an API turns a website “into a platform that others can build on” (Helmond 2015: 4). For Airbnb, an important tool that others connect to the platform to build new functionalities is a property management system (PMS), a cloud-based software service that facilitates the centralized management of large numbers of listings simultaneously. Another example are pricing tools, a type of software that aggregates and analyses market data to automatically determine optimal pricing and maximize revenue. But a platform simply to manage listings is not enough. As Johannes explained, “what I [also] need is better coordination with my staff, for the cleaning.” Thus, he was working on a more extensive platform:

I'm building a platform where we have our client data, all the data about all the apartments, because it's important that we have all the details. It starts with easy stuff, like where to find it in the building, but it gets to where are the cleaning supplies, where are the special cleaning supplies, how is it to be done with the sheets. If we have three guests coming. [...] The time-tracking, so we have up-to-date information about how long each cleaning took, that should also get in there.

Johannes' company's own platform formed a central place for gathering information and data on all aspects of the company; data that he then used to “to optimize [and] to automate a lot of things.” Like Thomas, he was able to professionalize by scaling up; not by acquiring more apartments, but by serving more customers. Of its 200 customers in Berlin, the company provided full management, including the creation of the listing, vetting and receiving guests, undertaking small maintenance chores in apartments, and cleaning once guests had left, for about 60. The remaining 140 customers managed their own listings on the platform and called in Johannes only for cleaning and check-in. The company's platform enabled him to optimize his customers' business, and by serving a lot of customers he was able to gather experience much more quickly.

In contrast, for archetypical ‘home-sharing’ hosts, there is a clear limit to the number of guests they can receive in a year. In Johannes’ opinion, his company’s work as an intermediary is much easier:

... we can do our best to keep the cleaning quality, and we have way more experience [in] how to handle situations. It’s a difference if it’s like one single host [who] can’t do all the stuff or solve a problem quickly. And we have 40 guests a week, and someone might have three guests a week.

Johannes had gathered a lot of knowledge and experience about the local market and how to optimize the work on and off the platform. The value of this experience and knowledge was also evident from the consulting that Johannes provided to aspiring Airbnb hosts who were working on setting up their own Airbnb apartment or business. This knowledge also made him able to navigate local regulations and maximize revenue. One strategy to do so stood out, namely the combination of STR with monthly or longer-term stays. The latter are generally not included in the 90-day limit for STR in Berlin and Johannes made use of this by strategically picking periods with high demand for highly profitable STR, while the remainder of the year he rented out apartments for monthly or longer stays. While Johannes – in contrast to Thomas – did not have financial capital at his disposal, he was able to accumulate another type of capital: data (Sadowski, 2019). By offering hosting services to a large number of customers, his company was able to gather a large amount of data and experience, which in turn helped it to optimize its operations. While Airbnb’s co-hosting functionality enabled Thomas to distance himself from hosting, the Airbnb API allowed Johannes to develop his own kind of platformed professionalization.

Disrupted professionalization

Elli moved to Berlin from the Netherlands in the early 2000s. As an artist without a steady income, moving to Berlin had been attractive as the costs of living and housing were low. Using their savings, Elli and her then husband had been able to buy a home. Soon they were also renting a studio apartment next door, as well as another apartment. Elli started to rent out both as ‘guest houses’ around 2009, before Airbnb came to town. When Elli’s father bought an apartment in the same neighborhood in order to be able to visit her in Berlin, Elli also started to rent this out to tourists when it was vacant. This fitted very well with Elli’s situation:

It seemed to me even very natural to do that, because I had space, I had time, and I was pretty motivated also to host guests. I was also myself not a Berliner, but I came from outside, so I would also be like, yes, nice to host guests. It was just a great possibility. It was a good opportunity for me to generate income.

Even though Elli was renting out three apartments, she did not feel like developing it further:

I want[ed] to keep it so that I can run it by myself and it's generating income for me, but not like do a big business or something. I felt like I really want to do it low key, kind of. I didn't want to bring it into the business-oriented direction, but more [a] kind of occupation and on a very human scale.

Like Irena, Elli preferred the hospitality aspect above optimizing hosting as a business and preferred to keep it personal. She always met guests in person to hand over the keys and provided them with handmade guidebooks for the neighborhood. When a friend told Elli about Airbnb, she decided to create listings there as well, in addition to her own website that she had relied on before. Renting out through Airbnb made her work easier and resulted in more income, but Elli remained somewhat doubtful:

It was very easy through Airbnb. It generated a lot of money. But maybe it would have been nice to keep it really this kind of personal touch and not go into this big scale business.

Her doubts about Airbnb's influence on her business might have resulted from how Airbnb developed in Berlin after she started using it. As the number of listings grew exponentially, the city of Berlin started to develop policies to regulate STR. This eventually led to a ban on STR of entire apartments, which came into effect in May 2016. In the meantime, Elli had divorced from her husband. She kept one of the two guest houses and was also still renting out her father's apartment. She applied for a permit to continue her business but was denied. She was allowed to rent out the furnished apartment, but only for periods of at least one month. This was much less lucrative and did not result in a sufficient income. When I last spoke with Elli, she was receiving social security and had just moved to a subsidized apartment a few blocks away from her old home. As she had just had a baby, the studio apartment that she owned and rented out was unsuitable for living in with a child. Now that she was renting out the studio for longer periods, she had lost her pleasure in hosting:

I totally enjoyed hosting on Airbnb, like I really, really liked it. I really liked maintaining the flats and I really liked getting people from everywhere and really liked hosting them.

Elli's story shows the intricacies and complexity of processes of professionalization. She used to manage multiple listings that she had rented with the aim of subletting them on the STR market. Thus, she might have been regarded as a professional host who would have been able to upscale her business. She was not fully convinced about professionalization when it would have required her to take a distance from the hosting work by outsourcing cleaning for example. Her preferred mode of professionalization had become impossible due to the huge increase in listings on Airbnb and the subsequent changes in the local regulations. Her story also shows that having property or a space to rent out does not guarantee success in a context of changing regulations. As opposed

to Thomas, Elli had been unable to circumvent them. The apartment that Thomas had had to sell was one of his many properties, but Elli was much more personally attached to the apartments she rented out. While she did have access to property, she was unable to treat them as capital as they were tied up in personal relations. This meant that her professionalization was disrupted.

Engineering professionalization

While Airbnb likes to argue that it enables middle-class households to generate an extra income, this dynamic suggests that Airbnb also enables growing inequality between asset-less hosts and asset-owning hosts. The latter can leverage Airbnb and benefit from processes of professionalization to increase rent from their assets and perhaps increase their value. Professionalization works for asset owners: multi-listing, renting out entire homes, and experience in hosting all increase hosting revenue, but in these processes ‘hosting’ is broken down into a lot of small pieces. This reinforces Semi and Tonetta’s (2020) recent argument in this journal that analyses of STR suppliers should take social class into account. The unequal chances to pursue professional hosting suggest that particular consideration should be given to both classed employment differences and the unequal distribution of assets among hosts.

Should we regard this as a coincidental, unintended side-effect of what is otherwise a platform that gives everybody a fair chance? This seems not to be the case: Airbnb has played a key role in accommodating and stimulating professionalization processes by engineering them into the platform. The most straightforward example is the development of the API. By facilitating the connection of PMSs to the platform, Airbnb has made it much more likely that particular professional users will now list their properties on Airbnb. Furthermore, PMSs have been in widespread use in the hotel industry since the 1980s (Collins, 1988). Indeed, Airbnb started accepting ‘boutique hotels’ to the platform in March 2018¹⁵ (Airbnb Newsroom, 2018). The growth of Airbnb’s Software Partners program¹⁶ suggests that hosts that make use of API-mediated interfaces are an important target group. The number of ‘preferred’ and ‘additional’ partners, all offering PMSs, grew from 14 in 2019 to 28 in 2020, and from 135 to 165 respectively (Airbnb, 2019a; Airbnb, 2020).

It does not end there: similar functionalities have now been made available to other users through a set of ‘Protools’ available in the Airbnb Dashboard. Introduced in 2019, these tools are supposed to “make it easier than ever to manage listings and reservations at scale” (Airbnb.com, 2019). Besides multi-listing functionalities, Protools include ‘Teams,’ a set of features that enables property owners to give others permission to access specific listing and booking details. Cleaning

staff, for example, can be granted permission to see arrival and departure dates, but not guest details. Airbnb here functions as an ‘operational platform,’ specified by Fields and Rogers (2019) as “allow[ing] investors to outsource and automate many aspects of the rental and property management process” (4). Importantly, the management process and daily operations are separated, facilitating an increasing division of labor. On the one hand, the focus of managers’ work shifts to the platform, where aspects might be optimized and automated – as illustrated by Johannes. What cannot be automated, on the other hand, are the daily operations that require someone to be present to provide physical and affective labor; Johannes can professionalize, however, by tracking and optimizing the cleaning labor at a distance through his own platform. In contrast, Irena was unable to scale up or outsource the labor involved in cleaning and receiving guests, and was thus unable to distance herself from this work. As such, the unequal opportunities to professionalize on Airbnb seem to further reinforce the inequalities generated by the capacity of capital and wealth to generate larger income streams than labor (Piketty, 2014; Adkins et al., 2019).

While still central to accounts of Airbnb, the figure of the ‘host’ and the work of ‘hosting’ is increasingly being broken down into separate types of labor that can or cannot be outsourced, automated, and optimized. Some aspects of hosting labor have most likely always been outsourced (e.g. when neighbors hand over keys while a host is on holiday), but Airbnb’s efforts to facilitate these practices by integrating them into the platform suggest that Airbnb is than willing to further decentralize the figure of the host. Moreover, Airbnb promises guests personal, unique experiences, but simultaneously stimulates hosts to de-personalize ‘hosting’ and to regard it as an optimizable business process that generates a reliable and steady income stream. Ideally, labor is eliminated altogether: the Host Assist program¹⁷ allows smart lock providers and other companies to integrate their services on the Airbnb platform, allowing guests to enter their holiday apartments without meeting anyone in person. To be eligible for business travelers, such a self-check-in option is required by Airbnb. Such changes help property owners to run an STR without having to be physically present, ultimately transforming hosting into ghosting.¹⁸

Conclusion

As platforms emerge as an increasingly present institutional form (van Doorn, 2019), which are (re)organizing the relations between markets, citizens, and the state, the distinction between those who are able to create value using platforms and those who are not has important consequences for the inequalities that emerge within a platform society. Professionalization has been shown to be a successful strategy on platforms such as Airbnb, and is taking an increasing share of the

revenue made. As this paper has asked, however, what are the conditions of possibility for participating in professionalization?

The paper started by developing a multi-faceted and processual understanding of processes of professionalization. As a particular type of platform logic, these are partially engineered into the Airbnb platform and tied to Airbnb's business model, though they are also always shaped by differentially situated users embedded in local spatio-historical contexts. How this plays out in practice has been explored through three case studies based on qualitative research in Berlin. The experiences of hosts in Berlin show that professionalization occurs in different shapes and forms and is not tenable for all hosts. Some hosts may be willing and able to take part in all or most of these professionalization processes, while others might aspire to do so but fail.

In some cases, professionalization turns out to be a precarious process. Hosts are able to take part in some processes of professionalization, but these result in insecure income streams and leave hosts at risk of prosecution if regulations change. Hosts who are able to bring in their own assets or capital are able to generate a more reliable income stream due their flexibility to switch to other business models and ameliorate risks by reinvesting their capital if needed. This type of privileged professionalization allows hosts to not just generate an income but also to accumulate wealth, for example by benefitting from value appreciation of the apartments they rent out. But bringing in capital is not the only way to benefit from professionalization, as Johannes' story exemplifies. By acting in a similar way to lean platforms (Srnicek, 2017), he scaled up his business while limiting ownership of his assets – except for data. The data he gathered allowed him to benefit from economies of scale, to cut costs, and to optimize his remaining operations. Other hosts turned out to be unable to navigate the risks and change their strategies, leading to disrupted professionalization. This might occur, as in Elli's case, when an apartment that belongs to a family member or which has personal value in other ways is being rented out.

Professionalization is not unique to Airbnb, but has emerged on other platforms as well. In the case of the ride-hailing platform Uber, Pollio (2019) has documented how some drivers in Johannesburg are dependent on 'middling men' who manage car fleets and lease a car to drivers. Such new actors have emerged informally and independently of the platform, though Uber has started to establish formal relationships with 'partners' that can help drivers to lease a car as part of their 'Vehicle Solutions program' or 'Fleet Match.'¹⁹ Such professionalization processes have effects for the whole range of stakeholders involved with platforms. As these processes drastically affect the valorization capacities of those who are able to take part in them, they result in increasing

inequality between hosts, as well as between platform owners, platform users, and non-platform users.

The research for this paper was undertaken before Airbnb rentals were severely hit by the Covid-19 crisis. While presenting a huge problem for hosts and platform laborers, the crisis promises to be a crucial period for research on platformization. In particular, it will reveal a lot about the durability of hosting. Who will be able to continue renting out on Airbnb after the Covid-19 crisis? And how does the crisis differentially affect home-sharers and professionalized hosts?

¹ Although often conflated, it should be noted that ‘Airbnb’ can designate both the company that owns the platform and the platform itself. In vernacular language, ‘Airbnb’ is also regularly used to designate a particular apartment that is rented through the Airbnb platform. In this paper, ‘Airbnb’ refers to the company; when I refer to Airbnb as a technological platform environment, I use ‘the Airbnb platform.’

² Scraping’ or ‘webscraping’ is a technique used to extract data from webpages. The process aims to separate content from form (the design of the webpage) and to store the data in a readable format. The most commonly used sources for such data are AirDNA, a commercial enterprise that sells Airbnb data to (prospective) Airbnb hosts, real estate investors, and researchers, and the open-source initiative InsideAirbnb, run by internet activist Murray Cox. See <http://insideairbnb.com/behind.html> for more information about the technicalities of scraping.

³ ‘Superhosts’ are “the champions of the Airbnb world of hospitality” (Roelofsen and Minca, 2018: 170). It is a status that is granted to hosts who consistently score highly on a series of indicators. Achieving Superhost status promises to enable hosts to earn more money, to have their listing shown more often in search results and other Airbnb channels, to gain access to dedicated Superhost customer service, and to receive ‘exclusive rewards,’ including a yearly \$100 travel voucher (Airbnb.com, n.d.). On a hosts’ listing and profile, a small medal appears when they are a Superhost.

⁴ Instant Booking is a feature that allows guests to book an accommodation instantly, without having to wait for approval by the host.

⁵ It should be noted that ‘commercialization’ and ‘professionalization’ are not clearly distinguished in the literature. Kadi et al. (2019), for example, focus on ‘commercialization,’ but build their argument on research that employs ‘professionalization’ instead. The distinction between the two is nevertheless important. I would argue that commercialization, understood as the process whereby financial gains take on increasing importance, is fundamental to Airbnb’s activities, since the platform and company have been pivotal in the creation of a new STR market (Stabrowski, 2017). Although the importance of financial gains might differ for hosts, a monetary transaction is necessarily part of the interaction; without this, Airbnb would not differ from Couchsurfing, an online platform that, like Airbnb, connects members offering or looking for temporary accommodation, but without requiring guests to pay for stays.

⁶ Grisdale (2019) and Cocola-Gant and Gago (2019) form two notable exceptions. Both suggest that intermediaries play an important role by offering management services for STR and advising potential investors.

⁷ The *Mietendeckel* or rent freeze came into effect in March 2020, fixing current rent levels for all rental housing in the city and requiring landlords to lower rents when they exceed certain thresholds.

⁸ Quotes in German have been translated by the author.

⁹ See <https://www.airbnb.com/help/hosting>.

¹⁰ See <https://community.withairbnb.com>.

¹¹ Note that Airbnb does not check if a ‘listing owner’ owns the space that they are listing, thus they are not necessarily the legal owner of the space.

¹² This is consequential for both scholarly work and public debates on STR and Airbnb. In academic studies, the notion of ‘host’ has been used as a building block for concepts such as the ‘multi-lister.’ The ambiguity of what a host is means that the concept of multi-lister might both be too broad (including apartments that are managed but not owned by the listed host) or too narrow (excluding owners of multiple properties that use multiple accounts to manage them, or who have a middleman that lists them on Airbnb). Similarly, in the public debate on regulating STR, policies such as the ‘One Host, One Home’ are founded on the idea that it is clear who the host is.

¹³ See <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jun/08/berlin-ban-airbnb-short-term-rentals-upheld-city-court>.

¹⁴ See <https://www.iamexpat.nl/housing/real-estate-news/dutch-council-state-if-you-rent-tourists-amsterdam-you-need-permit>.

¹⁵ While the API was publicly announced in 2019, there were signs that selected users had previously already received access to an API.

¹⁶ See <https://www.airbnb.com/d/software-partners>.

¹⁷ See <https://www.airbnb.com/help/article/1188/what-is-host-assist-and-how-do-i-sign-up>

¹⁸ To develop a full picture of Airbnb's role and the affordances of the platform vis-à-vis the professionalization of hosts, additional studies are required that will take a closer look at the features, functionalities, and tools that the platform provides.

¹⁹ See <https://help.uber.com/driving-and-delivering/article/how-can-i-find-a-vehicle>.

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