

Press Release

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How Airbnb's data hid the facts in New York City

New York City, NY. February 10, 2016: On December 1 2015, Airbnb made data available about its business in New York City, with much fanfare. A new report by Murray Cox and Tom Slee shows that the Airbnb data release misled the media and the public.

Airbnb's data release was presented as "the first time Airbnb has voluntarily shared city data on a wide scale on how its hosts use the online platform".¹ This report shows that the data was photoshopped: Airbnb ensured it would paint a flattering picture by carrying out a one-time targeted purge of over 1,000 listings in the first three weeks of November. The company then presented November 17 as a typical day in the company's operations and mis-represented the one-time purge as a historical trend.

The report also shows that the purge was not part of Airbnb's regular enforcement activities: no similar intervention took place against segments of their community not under the scrutiny of City Officials, and data from other major markets in North America and elsewhere show no remotely comparable intervention. The report shows that the purge was limited to the exact data set that Airbnb presented to the public, and on which it based the claims it made to major news outlets.

The intervention was so specific, and the timing so close to the date of the New York City snapshot, that the conclusion is inescapable: Airbnb removed listings from its site so that its data set would paint a more attractive picture of its business, to better influence media and public opinion.

"How Airbnb's data hid the facts in New York City reveals the cynical lengths that Airbnb will go to manipulate its data to create a fiction in furtherance of its agenda. This report uncovers Airbnb's attempt to conceal what many have long believed to be true – that a disproportionate amount of Airbnb's revenue is obtained from commercial operators with multiple listings of entire apartments. These commercial operators, through Airbnb's platform, deprive New Yorkers of permanent affordable housing further exacerbating our housing crisis. Airbnb's purge of more than 1,000 listings to present a false picture to the media and elected officials highlights its lack of transparency and refusal to work with New York City in good faith. This is just another example of how Airbnb does not share the best interests of our communities."

-- Marti Weithman, Supervising Attorney, MFY Legal Services

"Mark Twain reminded us that there are three kinds of lies -- lies, damned lies, and statistics -- and Airbnb has certainly mastered the third kind. Far from being open and transparent, this report shows that Airbnb intentionally misled the press and elected officials in New York. The data clearly disproves Airbnb's perennial argument that they want to work with city officials to protect everyday New Yorkers, fight illegal hotel activity, and remove "bad actors" from their site. Instead, it appears the company took extraordinary one-time measures to manipulate data and make themselves look good on one day in one city."

"In spite of their claim to champion the interests of "regular" people, Airbnb's business practices encourage tenants and landlords to break the law, put their neighbors at risk, and contribute to the ongoing crisis of affordability in our city. If Airbnb really wants to work with the community, they should cooperate with city enforcement officials and ensure their users obey the law."

-- Liz Krueger, New York State Senator

“Murray Cox and Tom Slee’s in-depth examination of Airbnb’s data in ***How Airbnb’s data hid the facts in New York*** shows without a doubt that Airbnb staged its November 17th data release, performing a one-time dump of more than a thousand commercial listings just prior to the release. Airbnb clearly has no sincere interest in transparency nor in accountability for its actions. It continues to profit from thousands of illegal listings on its site, and ignores commercial operators who openly violate NYC’s housing laws at the expense of worsening NYC’s housing crisis. It comes as no surprise that Airbnb would deliberately manipulate their data as a public relations ploy.”

-- Sarah Desmond, Executive Director, Housing Conservation Coordinators

"I'm really surprised. This analysis calls into question the overall accuracy of the data Airbnb provided and how genuine Airbnb is about the "community compact" they presented to NYC government officials and the media in December 2015. It raises two further questions:

1. Are there other discrepancies in the data Airbnb provided to the public?
2. Do these or other factual discrepancies exist in the offering documents Airbnb used to raise capital from investors?

I am grateful to Murray Cox and Tom Slee for analyzing the raw data and getting the real story behind Airbnb's PR campaign"

-- Helen Rosenthal, New York City Council Member

The report can be viewed at tomslee.net/how-airbnb-hid-the-facts-in-nyc and insideairbnb.com/how-airbnb-hid-the-facts-in-nyc.

About Murray Cox and Tom Slee

Murray Cox

Murray Cox is a Brooklyn based independent digital storyteller, community activist and technologist. He founded the Inside Airbnb project, which provides data and tools to help understand Airbnb's impact on residential communities.

Tom Slee

Tom Slee has a PhD in theoretical chemistry, a long career in the software industry, and his 2006 book *No One Makes You Shop at Wal-Mart* has been used in university economics, philosophy and sociology courses. His new book, *What's Yours is Mine: Against the Sharing Economy (OR Books)*, grew out of data-driven investigations of Airbnb and Uber. He lives in Waterloo, Canada.

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