

Book review

Edited by Jeroen A. Oskam

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What a great little book! This book is a must-read for any researcher, policy maker and eligible voter. “Voter?” you question. “Absolutely”, I answer, and given our focus on the future, soon to be eligible voters as well. Indeed, those future voters might still be more attuned to the gripping narrative through which Oskam builds his story in the introduction. A browse through the table of contents reveals a well-structured, flowing set of 14 chapters (I am deliberately counting the Introduction as one), with meaningful headings that highlight the storyline. The early chapters serve to establish a solid foundation by critically engaging with key terms, concepts and the evolution of their use in both the academic and practice discourses. The middle parts of the book then let the data speak – and by data we are talking the data that actually matter, or at least should matter, particularly to policy makers. The latter third of the book then delves into four future scenarios, making this book a great fit with Channel View Publication’s Future of Tourism series under which it is published. It does so in an applied sense, using four capital cities as examples. This allows for inherent variances in socio-political systems which is highly relevant given the entangled nature of the “sharing” phenomenon.

The “sharing economy” and specifically Airbnb story has many elements of a great story which this book pertinently highlights: there are secrets, covert petitioning, overt celebrations, offers too good to refuse, entrapment, surprises and twists and turns that will continue to evolve, influenced by powers visible and invisible and protagonists

that may just turn out to be mere sideline players. The scary part is that this story is our current reality. Thus, this book is timely. On one hand it will be superseded quickly in an exponentially growing discourse. On the other hand it will continue to provide a solid snapshot of current thinking and practice, as well as an opportunity for future reflection on where things have actually moved in comparison to the scenarios presented.

The book highlights significant weaknesses in the literature to date while at the same time documenting a maturing of the academic discourse. A rapid shift through Jafari’s (1990) platforms of tourism thought are illustrated, with this book representing elements of both the knowledge- and the ethics-based platforms (Jafari, 1990; Macbeth, 2005). With regards to practice, the book provides a sobering wake-up call for policy makers, highlighting how the tentacles of big business by the winning few are wielding power and control. It also details a repeat of the current social phenomenon documented in places like the USA and Australia in which the people who get hurt most by the actions, are the ones supporting them.

The book offers an important and thorough critical engagement with the topic which is still rare in the rapidly growing academic literature on the subject. Oskam’s methodical approach of working through definitions and current understanding of each pertinent concept is to be commended and is the foundation to his line of argument. He supports it with relevant data from multiple sources to build a triangulated perspective, without minimising the limitations of currently available data sources. One by one, prevalent myths are busted. Examples include that the “sharing economy” (as embodied by Airbnb) is about more efficient use of underutilised assets, or that it seeks to achieve greater efficiency through a reduction of consumption’ (p. 7); the elaboration on a compromised notion of community benefit and public interest (p. 18); or that host and guests in the Airbnb context are peers (p. 52).

The Future of Airbnb and the “Sharing Economy”: The Collaborative Consumption of our Cities

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If I had to nominate an area that warrants further attention in the book, I would suggest it could be the role of the media in perpetuating these myths and a dedicated section on power and politics, though many examples of the latter are woven into the narrative.

Oskam exposes the dissonance between Airbnb's rhetoric and elaborately groomed profile, and the actively hidden winner-takes-all reality of Airbnb's practices and impacts. The data-backed exploration of listing types, increasing professionalisation and multilisters paint a picture of social inequality and incentives to circumvent regulations (e.g. pp. 66, 94 and 107). As illustrated through the generous use of relevant examples, a pragmatic view is interwoven in the discourse, highlighting that the continuous evolution may well involve counter-disruption without necessarily suppressing the innovation and benefits arising therefrom (p. 28).

Whether you are an academic who is overworked and overcommitted, a future voter who prefers a fiction novel, an Airbnb host who is proud to contribute to the sharing of resources, a policy maker who just wants

concise insights into key issues, or a local city councillor striving to improve the lives of your constituents and local community – head on down to the library now to pick up your shared copy of this book or conveniently access the e-version. The paperback's spine is only 1 cm thick, its chapters are short and snappy, its story is engaging, its argument is strong and well resourced. "Still too much to read", you say? Do not worry. Just read the introduction and the chapter summaries (and let them draw you in).

Pascal Scherrer

Pascal Scherrer is based at School of Business and Tourism, Southern Cross University, Bilinga, Australia.

References

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