

# The Barnstable Patriot

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Opinion

## Like Facebook, Airbnb is now our problem

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As a college sophomore, Mark Zuckerberg never imagined his website FaceMash, which let users vote “hot or not” on female undergrads, would become Facebook.

Today, Facebook’s 2.38 billion users include my 154 “friends,” Russian bots, ISIS recruiters, and the Myanmar military, which used it to incite ethnic cleansing. Zuckerberg apologizes frequently and welcomes government regulation. He also funded a research project to assess social media’s impact on democracy.

Now another young CEO has lost control over what he created. Like Facebook, it’s become our problem, not his.

Brian Chesky was 27, living in San Francisco, struggling to pay rent. So he bought air mattresses, put up a website, and took three strangers in, each paying \$80 per night. His website became Airbnb, now a global juggernaut with a pre-IPO value of \$38 billion.

Airbnb’s official story of sharing a spare room with a traveler for a little extra income isn’t supported by the data. What really happened, what Chesky failed to imagine, was power users operating full time, a revolving door and de facto motel chains.

Inside Airbnb, a watchdog organization established by Australian housing activist Murray Cox, collects data showing that most listings are for entire homes, not rooms. According to a report published by the American Hotel and Lodging Association, entire homes produce 81 percent of Airbnb’s revenue. It has been reported that in some popular destinations, 65% to 70% of “hosts” are

commercial rental operations, some hiding behind host profile photos of “Bob” and “Mary.” Last summer, Forbes reported the vacation rental company Sonder Corp. has 2,200 Airbnb properties in 11 cities, and \$135 million in venture capital.

Airbnb and its competitors, like Vrbo and HomeAway, are attractive to bad actors because they provide anonymity. While there are plenty of unremarkable rentals, and responsible hosts, London initiated a crackdown that was inspired by pop-up brothels. The only thing Airbnb really knows is the credit card number of the one person who performed the transaction.

Destination communities are now working to compel Airbnb to abide by its original mission. Homeowners have to be primary residents of the property. Many require that hosts be physically present with renters, ensuring they don't become the neighbors' problem.

While Barnstable welcomes summer tourism, it's also home to many people. I don't live here, my mother does. She dislikes this term, but I'll use it: Mom is a senior citizen. I don't like thinking about a stream of strangers coming and going next door, with an agreement that says “parties OK.” Mom has a 6-year-old granddaughter who visits frequently. No, I do not like the idea of her playing out back next to a de facto motel, home to no one. Would you?

The Economic Policy Institute points to reasons that hotels are clustered away from residential areas, and finds a “strong possibility that (Airbnb) units are indeed imposing large costs on neighbors.” According to the Williams College Department of Economics, there are “mechanisms that may cause property values to decrease” and “might make living near concentrations of Airbnb units unpleasant.” Realtors are debating whether proximity to commercialized homes should be added to disclosure forms.

Beginning today, the state's 5.7% hotel tax will be extended to short-term rentals. The law establishing that tax contained a provision creating the Cape Cod and Islands Water Protection Fund with an extra 2.75% local surcharge. Boston also decided to ban investor “hosts” with multiple property listings, and Airbnb sued. As Barnstable officials discuss rezoning - at the moment, behind closed doors - are they worried about being sued, too? Probably. Litigation is one of Airbnb's go-to business tools.

Silicon Valley likes to say its goal is to make the world a better place. Former Facebook and Google engineers have set up a painfully candid “Ledger of Harms.” While they believe digital innovation has benefited society, it has also done great damage.

To that Ledger of Harms, it’s time to add this: the downgrading of our neighborhoods.

In a 2018 Vox Media interview, it was suggested to Brian Chesky that Airbnb is “a great thing for the traveler, but it might suck for the person living next door.” Brian nodded in agreement. “It does sometimes suck.”

People living next to a home that’s turned into a commercialized Airbnb or worry they suddenly could be are advised to visit [www.BarnstableWatch.com](http://www.BarnstableWatch.com), an organization of Barnstable residents concerned about homes used as revolving-door hotels.

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