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Pro-Seminar

Airbnb Ethics Reflection

1. **Do you believe that Airbnb is responsible for reducing discrimination and bias among the users of their platform?**

Yes and No. I do believe that Airbnb is responsible for taking reasonable steps to reduce discrimination and bias among users of the platform; however I do not believe they are responsible outside of the realm of reasonable measures—which I define as interventions and systems designed to educate users, create a safe inclusive space, and methods of on-going research and “temperature-taking” to track how they are doing and if their users are safe on the platform. I also include investing money in a full-time staff to design company systems for inclusion in my definition of reasonable measures.

I don’t hold them entirely responsible overall because discrimination is unfortunately so prevalent in all aspects of society that there are larger cultural problems that need to be fixed with institutional racism and implicit bias before any company could fully eradicate it from their platforms. But I do believe they have an obligation to actively attempt to reduce it and to invest money in systems to work towards that goal in a scientific approach based on bias reduction research.

1. **Do you agree with the methodology behind the changes that were made to the platform? Are these changes effective in reducing discrimination and bias?**

Yes. I do agree with the choices that Airbnb has made to create a team devoted to diversity and inclusion on staff. I think they made a smart choice by hiring the former head of tourism in Washington D.C. who is herself both highly experienced in this arena as well as a woman of color who can approach the problem with an “own-voice” perspective.

I agree with their changes to make profile pictures show up after a request has been accepted, but I think they need to do more research into the importance of using photos at all versus just ratings or a short description of a user’s goals in making a reservation.

I don’t think there is enough information yet to say definitively one way or the other if these changes are effective, but it is certainly true that bringing awareness of the issue will activate a user’s system 2 thinking as we discussed in Persuasive Design and as a group. System 2 thinking allows a person to move from faster “auto-pilot” type decision-making to a slower, more thoughtful facts-oriented decision-making process. The research team’s report seems to show that it’s likely a lot of the discrimination is coming from implicit bias. As a result, psychological studies show that activating system 2 thinking can help counter that implicit bias. I would argue that these changes are a step in the right direction.

1. **Taking into consideration the mission of Airbnb, can you envision additional or alternate changes that could have been made to the Airbnb service that could more effectively address discrimination and bias?**

There are many steps that Airbnb can take to more effectively address discrimination and bias. We’ve learned about several of them in Persuasive Design this semester. They could engage in counter-stereotype training by showing people of color from all backgrounds in their website photos on a regular basis. They do have a video of subjects from diverse backgrounds surrounded by cute animals on their home page which will prime viewers with positive affect, but most of their other photos feature the bnb spaces without people in them. There is room to add more photos featuring users from all backgrounds throughout the platform. This will help “prime” users on both the renter and rentee side to counter implicit bias.

Additionally, they could take steps to educate users on both sides about the site’s history of discrimination and offer them a chance to “opt-in” to being an inclusion ally when they sign up with the site. Opting in can help create cognitive dissonance via hypocrisy induction if they behave counter to their agreement to be an ally. This would be a small and simple way to increase awareness and reduce the likelihood for discriminatory behavior.

On a larger scale, I think Airbnb could benefit from having a formalized investigation process created so that they get reports like the HBR one on a regular basis. This will help them to track their progress and test their proposed interventions for effectiveness. If they do not keep testing, they cannot measure the results and iterate to find better solutions in the long run.

On a national scale, I believe there needs to be some kind of regulation put in place formally for platforms that provide paid services to users. Discrimination is against the law; it seems that there should be a baseline of “cyber safety” that platforms must meet to help avoid discriminatory practices on their site. The same way that there are laws requiring users to be 13 years old to interact on some platforms and 18 years old to interact on others. The goal is that these young users will be protected from predators and corrupting influences by these regulations. It’s not a far jump in my mind to have similar requirements, such as having a system for measuring inclusivity and accessibility, for platforms like Uber, Airbnb, and others.