

## San Francisco Chronicle publishes series of columns regarding short term rentals that are lacking substantiated facts and are blatantly skewed

by Frank Breakwell (March 15, 2017)

As advocates for the reasonable regulations of short term rentals, we have heard just about every cockamamie argument presented by those that would rather see them banned across the state. The general arguments against short term rentals are always rooted in complaints that they are illegal hotels, weekend party houses or commercial endeavors that are destroying the very fabric of neighborhoods by alienating neighbors from one another. Another favorite argument amongst dissenters is the misled correlation between depleting housing stocks and short term rentals.

These arguments against short term rentals are the basis used in a series of articles published by columnist, David Talbot of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, in the last two weeks. His jarringly subjective articles analyze the issue of short term rentals without analyzing it.

The practice of short term rentals is a practice as old as time itself. For centuries, vacationing families have rented summer homes or apartments as they went on vacation since they offer a more comfortable experience than trying to cram everyone into a hotel room. Boarding houses have been around since the old testament. With the technological advances of the 21st Century however they have come under greater scrutiny. With them being vilified as the cause of discord in otherwise unified neighborhoods that are being turned into "illegal hotels" that invite noisy party houses and unruly guests to wreak havoc for the hosts neighbor.

This is the premise Talbot is running on in his articles, beginning with the first in the series published on March 5th. He opens this article, conveniently titled "*Airbnb's strange manifest destiny*", with "Everyone I know who has rented out a room or an in-law unit on Airbnb has a horror story". He then proceeds to exemplify three fantastical stories that could be plucked out of any short term rental hosts worst nightmare. His last story struck a particular chord with me, he states:

*And then there was the young, mentally disturbed woman who was looking not just for a room to rent for a few days but for someone to take care of her. The woman rented a room in the home of my friend Cindy Alwan, a freelance fashion designer in Berkeley who makes ends meet by renting her oldest son's room on Airbnb when he's away at college. When Alwan spoke with her guest, the woman would often break down crying. After her stay was over, she appeared again on Alwan's doorstep, barefoot and wearing nothing but a coat. "Do you want to go out to dinner?" she asked Alwan, who declined the invitation.*

*"It's like she wanted to connect with a family," Alwan said. "I felt so bad for her, but I didn't know what to do."*

*The situation grew stranger when the young woman found the key to a neighbor's backyard cottage that was also listed on Airbnb and made herself at home. The hosts later found her, naked in bed, and when they asked what she was doing there, she got up and left.*

Call us skeptical, but this defies the scope of reason. If this genuinely happened, why were the police not called? Such strange behavior would illicit a call to the police. These horror stories are used by short term rental opponents on a regular basis & what I find interesting, aside from their fantastical nature, is that there is never any concrete supplements to these stories. They are always voiced as factual and what is worse commonplace, without any tangible evidence to back them up (i.e. a police report, statement etc...). I would venture to ask Mr. Talbot, since when is hearsay qualified as tangible proof. Saying that all the people you know that has rented on Airbnb have "had a horror story" is blanket logic & equating that since those I know have had a bad experience, all people have is a logical fallacy and deeply misleading.

Don't get us wrong, we are not dismissing the fact that there are some hosts that have had a bad experience while renting their home as a short term rental. We're merely stating that they are not commonplace, something that Mr. Talbot seems to be elusive to in his generalities on the topic in his opening statement. His disdain for the practice of short term rentals and for Airbnb becomes apparent as this first article continues.

The key statement out of the second half of this article is the general depiction he gives of short term rental hosts. He states:

*Putting aside the commercial landlords who are Airbnb hosts, I suspect the great majority of those who advertise rooms in their homes do so out of pressing economic necessity, not out of some desire to broaden their horizons by inviting complete strangers into their homes*

So let me get this straight, the only people who rent out short term rentals are predatory commercial landlords or desperate people barely clinging onto their homes using Airbnb as their only lifeline and means of support? This black and white logic is dangerous when analyzing anything as it simplifies a complex issue and does it a general disservice.

Talbot continues his trend of skewed logic in his March 7th article, titled "*City's Airbnb battle pits Democrat against Democrat*", where he woefully describes the tensions being cause within the city on this issue. His primary concern appears to be the supposed amount of housing stock being diminished. He states:

*Share Better SF, an anti-Airbnb coalition funded partly by the hotel industry and the hotel workers union, estimates that as many as 14,000 units have been taken off the market in San Francisco because of the short-term rental industry. The group says that the great majority of local listings are advertised by commercial landlords, not mom-and-pop hosts. "With more than 7,700 active hosts, and only 1,800 of them registered with the city, you can see why Airbnb is threatened," says Share Better SF's Dale Carlson. According to Carlson, the "unregistered hosts can't sign up with the city because they're not renting primary residences, but second homes and other investment properties."*

It's fascinating how rather than quoting a housing study conducted by a neutral party he chooses to use the findings of a coalition funded by the "hotel industry & hotel workers union". There have been several independent studies conducted by various sources including the California Department of Housing & Community Development (CDHCD) State Housing Assessment through 2025 titled *California's Housing Future: Challenges & Opportunities* ([see blog post here](#)) that have attributed the diminished housing stock to a lack of new housing construction to meet the growing demand. Rather than being

objective he accuses Airbnb of being a special interest group while in the same breath advocating for a special interest group of his own. We find it highly doubtful that his special interest group genuinely cares for the supposed displacement of tenants.

Talbot's latest article takes the cake as far I am concerned in a "journalist" using their voice in a misleading manner with the intent of propagating their own agenda. In yesterday's article, "*Readers vent about Airbnb: The good, the bad and the ugly*", Talbot opens with:

*My columns on Airbnb last week hit home with a lot of readers. Some offered their own horror stories. Others rushed to defend a rental service they rely on for supplemental income. And some tried to map out a nuanced, middle-ground position that they felt is missing in the heated debate over Airbnb.*

*Herewith, you will find a sampling of the reader feedback. First, another horror story — because, as we say in the news business, if it bleeds, it leads! Nothing deeply weird or creepy along the lines of the movie "Get Out." But I did receive emails that made living next door to an Airbnb hotel sound, if not as bad as proximity to the Bates Motel, still deeply unpleasant.*

What fills us with chagrin is his smugness at the debate and his general dismissal of any viewpoint that he views as inferior to his own. His use of the descriptive adjective of "nuanced" to describe those readers that expressed a middle ground position on the issue is indicative enough of his general position of vilifying short term rentals without pause. It is interesting that most of the samplings in this article coincide with his own personal sentiments. His latest horror story is another generic party house debacle which he regurgitates without taking pause to check into its validity. His reasoning for sharing this story first is interesting, by his own logic one would assume that since the "bleeding" of positive experiences by hosts outweighs the negative that would be the lead. He clearly has different sentiments. These three articles parade his sentiments as indisputable facts, when in reality they are merely opinions and not substantiated news.

The issue of short term rentals is a complex issue with many different facets to it. It is not an issue that can be easily resolved nor is any one side correct. With reasonable regulations and enforcement all parties can come to an amicable resolution. Key here is dialogue and basing ones opinions on proper facts. As a society we rely on our journalists at times to provide us with the objective facts on any given issue. When a "journalist" uses his medium to promote his own agenda and to tilt the balance in favor of the special interest groups he aligns himself with it gives the reader a distorted image on an issue. Instead of parading his opinions as facts, we would invite this columnist to be objective on this issue and base his opinions on various objective sources instead of rooting them on his own sentiments on the issue and misinformed sources. We certainly can provide, both directly and sourcing others, a clearer lens to look at the issue.

**Read the *San Francisco Chronicle* articles here:**

[Airbnb's strange manifest destiny](#)

[City's Airbnb battle pits Democrat against Democrat](#)

[Readers vent about Airbnb: The good, the bad and the ugly](#)