Hospitality & Society
Volume 1 Number 3

© 2011 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/hosp.1.3.245_1

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Technologies of hospitality: How planned encounters develop between strangers

ABSTRACT

1. *New technologies in use today like CouchSurfing.com are allowing people to create*
2. *planned encounters, en masse, between other strangers. These 'technologies of*
3. *hospitality' are producing new rules of engagement, and new relationships that*
4. *blur the boundaries between friend, acquaintance, stranger and enemy – boundaries*
5. *that are yet to be defined. This article will show that while mobility inevitably*
6. *causes strangers to collide and interact, certain technologies of hospitality in use*
7. *today create conditions for strangers to meet one another and engage in acts of*
8. *hospitality – moments of intimacy, closeness or mutual understanding. This article*
9. *outlines the process by which two strangers become close using one such technology:*
10. *CouchSurfing.org. While such encounters foster trust, mutual learning and 'personal*
11. *growth', closeness is not always altruistic and technologies of hospitality also allow*
12. *people involved to exert their status and power during interaction, creating moments*
13. *of tension, awkwardness or distrust. Using multi-method ethnography, this article*
14. *provides an in-depth account of these technologies of hospitality, focusing on the*
15. *relationships being created as well as the problems that arise for the way in which*
16. *we define friendship and closeness today.*

KEYWORDS

mobility
stranger
hospitality
CouchSurfing
technology
offline

This is not [about] gaining or losing ... its all about sharing life with someone who has got your wavelength. A guy comes to a land where everyone is a stranger and you lend a helping hand to him. That's hospitality, you might get that for money in a hotel but you will not get the real warmth and affection. That's what is fascinating about the work of [CouchSurfing], bridging minds of equal wavelength ... for a traveller.
(30-year-old Indian male CouchSurfing respondent)

As societies become mobile, strangers are meeting and interacting with each other more than ever before. Some of these meetings are chance encounters: at bus stops, airports or park benches. Others are coordinated using new online technologies including various online social networks, websites and mobile devices that enable people to pre-plan their meetings with strangers. Technology is 'deeply involved in the way people, objects and information are more and more "on the move"' (Pellegrino 2011: 6), and the tools that allow these planned encounters between strangers are what I term 'technologies of hospitality': producing new rules of engagement and new relationships that blur the boundaries between friend, acquaintance, stranger and enemy – boundaries that are yet to be defined.

This article will show that while mobility inevitably causes strangers to collide and interact, certain technologies of hospitality in use today create conditions for strangers to meet one another and engage in *acts of hospitality* – moments of intimacy, closeness or mutual understanding.

These technologies, part of a larger world of the digital and the mobile, can also include:

- Online social networks – where people gain accommodation or help finding accommodation or travel to meet friends of friends
- Hobby-based meet-up websites (see craigslist.com, meetup.com, various gaming websites), where people meet online in order to meet offline with the purpose of engaging in or discussing a common hobby
- Car-sharing or online hitchhiking websites
- Various dating sites, where people meet online in order to date offline.

This article outlines the process by which two strangers become close using one such technology: CouchSurfing.org. While such encounters foster trust, mutual learning and 'personal growth', closeness is not always altruistic and technologies of hospitality also allow people involved to exert their status and power during interaction, creating moments of tension, awkwardness or distrust.

Interaction between strangers using these technologies is not clear-cut, and the types of meetings fostered through such systems often challenge and renegotiate certain aspects of the interaction process. People become closer, faster and often for a very short period of time. People using such systems make trust judgements about one another based on a variety of cues not available in other contexts. Relationships fostered through technologies of hospitality create their own rules of intimacy and longevity, as well as power and obligation. Just as 'obligations to family and friends involve very strong normative expectations of presence and attention' (Elliott and Urry 2010: 54), technologies of hospitality also create relationships between strangers, rather than family or friend, which also hold certain obligations. As this article will show, because of these challenges in the interaction process, technologies of

hospitality create different interactions than do other forms of commercial and friend/family hospitality.

Through multi-method ethnography, this article provides an in-depth account of the interactions being created via these technologies of hospitality. I argue that interaction among strangers who use these websites can be enriching for the host and guest, creating moments of 'real warmth and affection', closeness, trust and givingness, yet can also be problematic, fostering moments of awkwardness, misunderstanding, distrust and the abuse of power. This reflects on critical hospitality theory more broadly – where the power relationship between host and guest is central to understanding hospitality in full. It is the host 'who has both the power and the property to give to the stranger, but crucially while remaining in control and ownership. Hospitableness, tolerance, generosity and compassion are therefore all distancing gestures that maintain the opposition of self and other' (Germann Molz and Gibson 2007: 169).

This article first outlines the research approach and theory used and then explores the key empirical findings that help define technologies of hospitality including methods of risk assessment, appropriate behaviours, conflict, control expectations, reciprocity, and cultural norms and variations. Here I will present an outline of the host as well as the guest, and the way power and control surface as the host takes ownership of a space. The discussion section explains how this technology of hospitality, in its mediated form, differs from other forms of hospitality.

TECHNOLOGIES OF HOSPITALITY: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

CouchSurfing.org is part of a global social networking phenomenon known as hospitality networking – online communities made up of millions of people who use an online space to search out free accommodation in the home of another network member. I became a member of CouchSurfing.org beginning in February 2005 and began my study as a participant observer in Warsaw in February 2006. For the following five years I became engaged in CouchSurfing as both a host and visitor. The research materials and conclusions presented in this article are based on ethnographic observations during this time along with interviews and interactions, which explore various concepts and 'systems of concepts' (Geertz 1973: 10) such as 'emotion', 'ideology', 'hospitality', 'reciprocity', and the 'stranger'. This research approach is intended to create a 'body of thick-description ethnography in the hope of rendering mere occurrences scientifically eloquent' (Geertz 1973: 10).

All of the CouchSurfers' experiences extracted below are derived from formal and informal interviews conducted throughout the course of my five-year study of the website. Since joining CouchSurfing in February 2005, I hosted, visited and met over 50 people in Canada, the United States, England, France, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Spain, Holland, Sweden and Poland. I spent between one and five days with these hosts and guests, during which time I constantly observed rituals, elicited stories regarding their own experiences, traced trust and property lines, and kept a fieldwork journal.

Geertz explains that "“doing ethnography” is like trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour' (1973: 10). Throughout my own work on CouchSurfing

(see Bialski 2011), various new ways of becoming close with strangers in the midst of mobility are illustrated as 'examples of shaped behaviour' (Geertz 1973: 10) when on the move.

In order to study mobile social phenomena, Büscher and Urry suggest that it is 'necessary to develop research methods that are 'on the move' (Büscher and Urry 2009; Büscher et al. 2011). To employ this approach, I focused on:

- Various forms of tracking – including physically travelling with my research subjects in order to understand the many and interdependent forms of intermittent movement of people, images, information and objects that constitute these technologies and moments of hospitality (Sheller and Urry 2006)
- Investigations of how people, objects, information and ideas move and are mobilized in interaction with others in order to understand the way 'grammars' or orders of social, economic and political relations are being shaped (Garfinkel 1967; Büscher and Urry 2009).

Research that is conducted under the mobilities perspective is oftentimes ethnographic (or part of 'mobile' ethnographies) and thereby intrinsically connected into practice. As Büscher and Urry explain, 'many are part of collaborative innovation projects, art and design interventions, or form part of policy advisory panels, programs and literatures' (2009: 111). Being the first academic to study this community, and after meeting with the founder of the website in Warsaw, I became accepted into the CouchSurfing community as their researcher and began my ethnography as both an ethnographer and collaborator in their creative team.

In the summer of 2006, the founder of the organization invited me to spend two months living with a group of volunteers at the 'Couchsurfing Collective' in Montreal – a temporary commune-of-sorts established in order to remodel, debug and improve the website. This was an ideal period to gain insight into the motivations that drive CouchSurfers to become part of the community, and the experiences and practices that shaped their view of the community. CouchSurfers coming through this house were eager to help and eager to express their thoughts. Thus, most of my twenty interviews took place in Montreal between July and August 2006, among CouchSurfers who had been actively hosting or visiting other members of the community. Over the five years of hosting and visiting others, I also led informal interviews and discussions and took notes in order to create a detailed description of the hospitality process.

While at the 'CouchSurfing Collective' in Montreal, I created a web-based survey that was conducted online with CouchSurfing members between August 2006 and March 2007. In those months, a little over 3000 CouchSurfers responded to my survey – answering 24 questions about their motivations to travel using CouchSurfing, the duration of their host – guest interaction, why they do or do not stay in touch with their host and guests, and other questions relating to the nature of their interaction on the website and in person with other CouchSurfers.

The thousands of responses derived from the survey, along with the data based on my autoethnography and interviews, created a rich, highly specific, detailed description of the host–guest relationship and provided insight into CouchSurfers' primary motivations to travel, what they hoped to gain from a new friendships, what they learned from their hosts/guests, how they described their relationships made via CouchSurfing, as well as their

reasons for not keeping in touch with their previous hosts/guests after their visit. The result was an unprecedented thick description of relationships initiated online via hospitality networks. The empirical examples found in this article are derived both from the open-ended survey responses as well as my in-person interviews.

OPENING THE DOORS OF HOSPITALITY

To begin with, it is worth noting that not everyone is 'empowered to be hospitable, to give hospitality to strangers' (Germann Molz and Gibson 2007: 12). In their edited volume, Germann Molz and Gibson (2007) explain the social contexts and implications of hospitality. Drawing on the historical roots of hospitality and contemporary hospitality practices, they offer a new understanding surrounding notions like place making, cosmopolitanism and inclusion/exclusion, and reflect critically upon the ethical implications, including the limits and possibilities, of social relations between people in an increasingly mobile and globalized world.

To develop further on the work of Germann Molz and Gibson, the aspect of hospitality explored here is the direct link between hospitality and relationship development – development of closeness, acts of giving and familiarity, as well as distance and power. Travellers, migrants, business people, students-on-exchange and nomads of all sorts are creating new ways of staying in touch with others, and creating new ties, new friends and loved ones. In societies where meetings are increasing between the mobile and the stationary, the host and the guest, the citizen and the migrant, friendship-making must involve hospitality. The plethora of different journeys in today's mobile world has thus led to a diversity of hospitalities. If 'hospitality poses the question of how to welcome the stranger' (Germann Molz and Gibson 2007: 2), it can be seen as becoming acquainted with, befriending or giving to an unknown other.

Hospitality is a crucial part of social networking. Social networking today is a different type of networking – based less on third-party referencing systems (i.e. an aunt suggests you meet her neighbour) that functions in traditional, 'organic communities' (van Dijk 2005) and more on chance meetings between strangers in mobile network societies (Larsen et al. 2008). Hospitality provides a space for closeness and intimacy to occur between strangers – a closeness that is 'virtually compulsive in modern societies' (Bensman and Lilienfeld 1979: 94). Because of the

alienating effects of the development of large, impersonal organizations in the modern world much of social life becomes run along impersonal lines [...]. A flight into intimacy is an attempt to secure a meaningful life in familiar environments that have not been incorporated into these larger systems.

(Bensman and Lilienfeld 1979: 94)

As the empirical findings below will also show, when strangers engage in meetings they engage in a form of hospitality which in turn sets out a power structure: those who have knowledge or take ownership of a particular place are the hosts inviting the others in (Simmel and Wolff 1950). Derrida stated that the act of opening oneself up or offering hospitality inevitably reaffirms: 'This is mine, I am at home, you are welcome in my home' (2000: 14). A host can state: 'You are my guest because this is mine'.

Space and place are central features of the experience of 'being-in-the-world' as an embodied subject, for embodiment is always experienced through spatial dimension. The human geographer Yi-Fun Tuan defines the emotional relationship with places or landscapes as *topophilia*, or 'the affective bond between people and place or setting' (1974: 4). Lupton, in her theoretical investigation regarding the emotional meaning of home, states that the perceptions of place and space that individuals gather from their senses – the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feel of the environment – have a potentially powerful role in the production of emotion. So just as people are able to shape aspects of their physical environment, so does the environment shape subjectivity (Lupton 1998: 152). She notes that the divide following industrialization between

what has been represented as the aggressive, impersonal world of paid labour or the 'public' sphere, and the 'private' domain of the family and intimate relationships, the home has become portrayed as a place of security, control over one's environment, warmth, comfort, creativity, and freedom.

(Lupton 1998: 152)

The home is also an emotionally authentic, private space. Outside of its walls, a person has to become an actor and provide a mere illusion of authenticity (Goffman 1967). Modern public life is a matter of formal obligation that 'seems non-authentic to us', while 'private life is the realm in which we attempt to behave in an authentic manner, to be "true" to ourselves' (Sennett 2003: 7; see Steylaerts and O'Dubhghaill in this issue).

In many ways, technologies of hospitality disrupt the neat dualism between private/public and the relations of power embedded in the host-guest relationship. What becomes problematic when using such technologies of hospitality is that there is no 'user manual' to the interactions that are being created. When previous theorists explained that certain 'laws of hospitality mark the limits, powers, rights and duties of the host-guest relationship' (Derrida in Westmoreland 2008), they did not take into account the fact that physical mobility can often create its own fluid 'laws', which force people involved to renegotiate such codes. Mobile hosts are less accountable to any one given sociocultural setting or social network, and can create their own set of rules of hospitality. This redefinition of hospitality can result in the host taking advantage of their guest, but can also result in the host enacting their utopian ideal of closeness and friendship with another.

When two people interact using a technology of hospitality, they abandon their status of being two strangers, and adopt roles that help create new boundaries of how and how not to act and new forms of familiarity between one another. Yet the way in which such relationships between host and guest are created using such technologies is not straightforward, especially for new users. How is this familiarity created? How are these boundaries negotiated? How does the host create security within his or her home environment? How does the guest maintain a feeling of freedom rather than obligation? The following questions will be addressed in the following sections using a variety of ethnographic examples in order to show how relationships between strangers develop using a technology of hospitality like CouchSurfing.org.

SETTING BOUNDARIES: ACCOMMODATIONS AND RECIPROCITIES

In the absence of monetary exchange, as in commercial forms of hospitality or familial obligation, as in the case of being hosted by friends or relatives, technologies of hospitality require participants to negotiate new forms of compromise, reciprocity and responsibility. Although each CouchSurfing encounter is unique, meetings between hosts and guests generally follow a certain pattern as hosts and guests work out these new boundaries of accommodation and reciprocity.

Often prior to meeting the host, the guest will contemplate their method of reciprocity. There are *explicit and implicit forms of reciprocity* within technologies of hospitality. Explicit reciprocity can be a small gift for their hosts which can be a specialty from their home country (see Chen in this issue). When guests have been travelling for some time, and do not have the means of bringing a gift from their home country, reciprocity is expressed in the form of an act – cooking, cleaning the home, making the host a present, leaving them a photograph, taking them on a picnic or taking them out for a meal. In the past, a French group of guests made me a cake according to their family's traditional recipe, another French group put 'thank-you' letters around the house, a photographer from Los Angeles took some professional headshots of me, a student from Philadelphia vacuumed my apartment and a Danish film-maker gave me a film she made. CouchSurfers are encouraged to foster this type of reciprocity through a built-in design feature on their online profile – a small box titled 'Teach. Learn. Share: What Can You Give Back to the Community?' This is a section on each user's profile which is visible to all users. Filling out this section is not mandatory, but it in essence encourages a guest to share something with their host, and vice versa.

Implicit forms of reciprocity arise when the host becomes a listener, almost adopting the role of psychotherapist or becomes the speaker, and adopts the role of storyteller. Adam, a 24-year-old Polish CouchSurfer stayed in Geneva for three days with a middle-aged journalist. According to Adam, his host had a 'desperate need to talk about himself', and for the three days when Adam visited him, he 'stayed up almost all night to talk about his life, and was less interested' in what Adam had to say. Adam was a listener, and as a guest, felt that he could not avoid the conversation.

There is a distinct role division between listener and speaker, host and guest. Sometimes the guest retells vibrant narratives (whether true or not is another issue) about their previous travels, which acts as a form of entertainment for the host. In other instances, the visitor becomes a listener – and the host tells a story or even a confession. Kasia, a Polish CouchSurfer, was in Portugal with her partner and both took on the role of the listener:

We were sitting around the dinner table and she started telling us that she had never had an orgasm in her life. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to do. It was really awkward. But because we were her guests, we couldn't say anything. We just sat there and listened to her.

(Kasia, Polish CouchSurfer)

As will be discussed later, this type of confession can sometimes become problematic. Conversations are not always fully reciprocal – sometimes one party is more of a listener than speaker and this division fluctuates throughout the

duration of a relationship. There are also certain situations where the guest becomes the storyteller. This usually happens in the case where the host is less mobile than their guest – perhaps because they have a family, a job, or do not want to or cannot afford to travel. The guest-as-storyteller is one of the attractions of the hospitality network – guests represent the vagabond, the wanderer who will bring tales of exciting lands and adventures. The host is then able to engage in an imaginary mobility (Sheller and Urry 2006) through the stories told by the guest.

Compromise is another form of implicit reciprocity – where guests must accommodate to the schedule of the host. Before arriving to their destination, a guest would first make arrangements to meet the host in a specific place and at a specific time. The host usually has the final say as to where and when they will meet. If the time and place of the meeting does not suit the guest (e.g. the guest's train is arriving later, they have too many bags to walk to the arranged destination), the guest can request to change the meeting time and place but the guest must always accommodate *their* plans to fit their host's schedule. If the guest has other priorities beyond just being hosted (e.g. the guest has an event like a conference to get to) the guest will usually compromise their plans or comfort to meet the requests of the host. While CouchSurfing in Glasgow, my CouchSurfing host would not leave me and the other two guests alone – wanting to show us the city, play us a private blues concert on his guitar and cook us dinner. As guests, we had to compromise our travel schedule in order to fit our host's plan for our visit. Depending on the demands of the host, the guests must engage in small or large compromises in order to 'please' their host.

Kasia, much like other CouchSurfers, had to give up her freedom to manoeuvre between listener and speaker, and despite not wanting to be a listener; she was trapped into that role because of her obligations to her host. The same analysis applies to Adam, who did not want to stay up all night listening to his host's confessions – but had to anyways due to his obligations as a guest. As Kasia said, 'What am I supposed to do? I couldn't tell her to be quiet. It was her house; we were eating at her dinner table. It would be rude to say anything'.

Adam states that avoiding talking to his host from Geneva would seem rude. Because CouchSurfing does not function on a monetary form of reciprocity – this 'reciprocity' can often be vague and implicit. Engaging in conversation often becomes a form of payment. Many of my respondents expressed the fact that as hosts they felt their visitors were using them as a hotel if they did not 'stick around and chat' with them. Technologies of hospitality can result in moments of closeness and intimacy, but awkwardness is another common product of these meetings, often reflecting the power relationship between host and guest.

SETTING BOUNDARIES: SELECTIVE HOSPITALITY

Adam, the same 25-year-old Polish CouchSurfer who travelled to Geneva, hosts CouchSurfers sporadically. Observing him manoeuvre through his inbox, I wanted to understand whose requests for accommodation he accepts and whose he rejects. Adam would click through profiles and exclaim, 'Yes this person looks cool'. or 'Oh, no, I'm definitely not hosting him!' The reasons for rejection included profile photos that looked 'weird', not enough information filled in their profile, too much information, bad looking, too good looking,

too old, too young, and interestingly enough, the fact that they were from Poland. Adam did not want to accept a CouchSurfer from his own country, stating that 'I'm not really into doing that. They're not different enough. I don't think I'll get anything out of that'.

Prior to hosting, a host makes judgements regarding whom to host and whom to reject. The CouchSurfing website calculates a user's response rate – meaning that when CouchSurfers do not respond to request e-mails, their response average is lowered. A low rating 'bumps' a user to the bottom of the search list for their city – which means that Adam must write back to all request e-mails, even the ones he rejects, in order to maintain a high response rating. Rejection e-mails usually involve excuses like 'I won't be around that weekend' or 'I am busy'—seldom do users explicitly state why they rejected the other user based on their personal traits. Sometimes, though seldom, a host makes a bad judgement during the online request phase, and ends up rejecting their guest upon meeting them face to face. Oliver, a young Canadian traveller in his early 20s, described a situation to me where his host, a Turkish woman living in Istanbul, had mixed up Oliver's online profile with a profile of a Turkish user:

She thought I was Turkish, and thought I was lying to her about being from Canada. And I showed her my passport, and I don't sound very Turkish. But in the end she kicked me out at 11pm at night in a dangerous neighbourhood in Istanbul

(Oliver, Canadian traveller)

Without formal rules to regulate the host–guest encounter, hosts often abide by their own set of rules of safety. While some can superficially reject a host based on their personal interests, hosts often make a risk assessment online and reject those users who look potentially unsafe. Once a host has met their guest, they also judge what is safe, right, wrong, appropriate or unacceptable to do in their own home, and these judgements may not always coincide with a guest's values – which, as in the case of Oliver, causes conflict and sometimes places the guest in risky situations. Oliver is among the rare number of CouchSurfers who have experienced such conflict – but his is a situation in which introducing strangers, the unfamiliar, into one's private space can cause unease to those who normally have a lot of control over that space.

During Oliver's first CouchSurfing experience elsewhere in Slovenia:

It was [Maricka's] first time hosting anyone. So she met me at the train station at 7am which was really nice. And then she dropped me off at her house and she gave me a little bed. And what she didn't tell me is that she hadn't explained to her grandmother, who was living there, that I was going to come. And her grandmother couldn't speak any English or French. And so [my host] left to go to work, and her grandmother woke up an hour later and she saw me, and she started having like this heaving fit. Like this [demonstrates] and apparently she has this breathing disorder. But I thought that she was going to take the big one right there from me not being able to explain who I am and I'm just this strange person in her house. And so I tried to explain through hand signals which just didn't work. And then I was just like, time to leave, I'll just come back later. So I went to lock the door behind me because [Maricka] had given me a key. And the grandmother saw me and came

up behind me heaving and grabbed the key and went back into her room ... And later on when Maricka explained who I was the grandmother was very happy to see me. Patting me on the head.

(Oliver, Canadian traveller)

A stranger like Oliver can represent a loss of control for an individual-in-control like the Turkish host, because she could not control or predict his actions due to lack of information about him, knowledge of his personal history or a sense of familiarity. Hosts adopt certain expectations of how their guest should and should not act in their home, which their guests may or may not share. In many cases, when asking respondents to relay a 'bad' CouchSurfing experience, common statements arise such as, 'I never had a bad experiences really. Just one time my CouchSurfers just slept all day'. 'They used my apartment like a hotel', is also a common response.

In stating that their guests 'slept all day', or used their apartment 'as a hotel', hosts imply that their guests should have been exploring the city or interacting with the host more as a newfound friend and less as a bellboy. The guest's offence seems to consist of treating the host's gift of hospitality as they might treat a commercial establishment. The emotion of disappointment follows a breach of pre-established expectations which, in this case, is for the guest to behave in a certain way in this area of control. Here, the host has certain pre-established expectations of how his or her space will be used, and is disappointed when that space is wrongfully exploited.

A NEW FAMILIARIZATION PROCESS

So far I have outlined the boundaries that emerge between host and guest around power, control, and implicit and explicit forms of reciprocity. However, rather than inhibiting intimacy, negotiating these power relations may engender a sense of closeness between hosts and guests. In contrast to commercial exchanges of hospitality, where friendship is not usually part of the accommodation package, or visiting friends and relatives, where hospitality is premised on an already-existing relationship, technologically mediated hospitality requires strangers to establish a sense of intimacy and closeness in the moment of hospitality.

The first acts of hospitality can be categorized into an *Introduction Stage*, where the guest and host meet in a public place or simply at the front door of the host's home, embrace and/or shake hands. In the case of CouchSurfing, the guest enters the private space of the host's home, the host shows the guest their bed/floor space/mattress etc., gives him or her a tour of the house, and then they sit down to dinner or leave the house altogether and start 'touring'. This is where the first verbal exchange is initiated, as the host and guest take turns giving a sort of self-monologue describing their biographical sketch. After initial small talk the first common biographical question observed is centred around place, such as 'what brings you to Warsaw?' Or the guest can ask 'how long have you been living here?' Discussing physical place within this introductory dialogue occurs because this is perhaps the most obvious common element shared between host and guest – being situated in the same house or apartment, in the same city. Yet, while the guest is a traveller in motion, just passing through the given location and the host is a permanent resident, they can find enough commonality in their difference to start a potentially smooth and insightful discussion, and one, which can be

interesting for both parties. This initial process of familiarization thus involves low risk and is based on a common subject among the two strangers. This stage can contain a true level of verbal intimacy if one or both individuals feel like delving deeper into a biographical discussion, although it usually takes the individuals to the second stage of friendship building to get more into this kind of level of intimacy.

The second stage, the *Insight Stage*, is the time in which the host and/or the guest provide some insight into their own life, the lives of others around them, their personal history, their experiences, their problems or their failures. A common theme in this stage is the presence of insight, which in turn raises the level of intensity of a conversation, thus elevating the intimacy of the exchange. The insight stage can, but does not have to, include an exhibition of emotions, but it always includes a sense of trust between one or both parties. Eye contact and close, personal, spatial proximity is present. This process can last anywhere between an hour and several days, depending on how long the individual surfer stays with the host. It is worth noting that it is the *Insight Stage* that produces the close personal connection that CouchSurfers long for. It is within the *Insight Stage* that they 'learn' about the other; acquiring and telling often intimate narratives about one's life, one's given location or culture. Michael, an American in his late 20s, stated that on the 'number of occasions' in which his hosts told him their life story, he could tell that doing so was 'exceptionally personal to them', and that they are 'very involved in it'. This discussion, for Michael, is 'part of what makes this whole experience seem so special. These things which come across as very emotional and very personal to the other person, just get given out as these gifts to the stranger that came by'. Such conversation can often become close or emotional. Common human emotions, independent of their culture of origin, are relayed through these narratives, such as memories of pain, love, fear or loss. Ashley, an American CouchSurfer, explains that 'one of the most intimate things that you can do with someone is tell somebody a story. So if you want to be closer with people, if you want to grow from them, get a story'. Intimacy and closeness between host and guest has the potential to be engaged in quickly because unlike other forms of hospitality, the host/guest relationship facilitated through technologies of hospitality is neither necessarily enduring nor locked in a strict location. In fact, these moments of hospitality are fleeting. Ulla, my Finnish respondent, stated:

Of course the process has to be quicker because they're only staying for a while so it's more intense, deeper than it would be when meeting random strangers on the street ... But with CouchSurfers it would be more intense ... it's just because you only know that they're going to be gone soon. When I talk to people I do not wish to discuss the superficial things like 'what went on in the football game' or 'which model has the biggest boobs,' so with CouchSurfer there's an excuse to avoid all that stuff because they're only there for a short time. So you get closer faster.

(Ulla, Finnish respondent)

The third stage, termed here the *Embedding Stage*, occurs when the guest has to leave to his or her next destination and both the host and guest are faced with the decision of whether or not to keep, or embed, this new friend into his or her network of friends. This decision is based on the intensity of exchange

during the insight stage, and the amount of intimacy and insight experienced by both parties. Michael described many of his conversations as 'special' or as a 'gift'. It is my argument that the bigger the 'gift' is, meaning the more the host/guest opened up to the other, the more likely the person will be embedded within their memory. This process of embedding is both physical as well as emotional – involving both practical acts like scribbling a name down in an address book or adding an e-mail address to one's e-mail account, but also experiencing various emotions attached to these practical acts. The process of embedding a friend is a decision which is completely new, and is a contract with oneself which states 'Yes, I will keep in contact with this person on a regular basis'. According to my online survey, CouchSurfers keep in touch with 50 per cent of their hosts/surfers. While I admit that 'keeping in touch' and 'regular basis' are fairly unspecified concepts, this can give a general outline as to how often one chooses to embed or not embed a new contact.

The process described in this section constitutes a new form of familiarization because of the speed and context in which two strangers meet and interact in an intimate, personal space. As strangers are able to meet in a private home so swiftly, and their interactions often last only a few days, a new kind of familiarization process must be negotiated to accommodate a stranger in such a familiar space. This differs from commercial or friend/family hospitality. When a hotel worker greets another guest at a hotel, they are two unfamiliar people interacting in an impersonal space. And when a family member hosts their kin, or friend-of-a-friend, they are two familiar people interacting in an intimate, familiar space. In both instances the proportion of closeness to the person and spatial proximity is in balance. The familiarization process within hospitality networks happens in the unique situations where a person greets a stranger in their intimate, personal space, and two people attempt to become close to one another in order to maintain this balance.

DISCUSSION

Technologies of hospitality create new kinds of conditions for strangers to interact. Such technologies propel strangers into close, intimate, emotional settings that engage the two strangers into an interaction ritual. There are various forms of 'boundaries' that I posed in the previous sections – and navigating these boundaries leads to new forms of familiarization. Interactional boundaries which help define friend and stranger or spatial boundaries which help define private space and public space are constantly being challenged within technologies of hospitality. As opposed to commercial hospitality, power is negotiated in new ways as new forms of compromise and reciprocity emerge, transforming the stranger into friend.

Certain products of such technologies help foster these relationships. Topophilia (Tuan 1974) helps foster a close, intimate, sociality between strangers who share, even for a short time, the private space of the host's home. Sharing one's 'private sphere' has sociocultural obligations attached to the act. Whereas in some settings this means acting out ceremonial customs in order to please the guest (Japan), in other settings this means sacrifice – giving up the host's comfort for the comfort of the guest (Serbia), or in other settings, sharing the home may mean being able to engage in a conversation that is less socially acceptable outside the home (Germany). These varying practices create a number of different opportunities for the host – guest relationship to unfold and for closeness and intimacy to emerge. The affective bond between

a host and their space also transfers meaning to anyone sharing that space. As Oliver in Montreal explains, 'anyone who's willing to invite people that they don't know into their own house, they're in general very generous and very open minded, and very extroverted to start with'. Second, 'fantasies of control' (Hage 2002, cited in Germann Molz and Gibson 2007: 9) also become a product of such technologies of hospitality. As an individual takes ownership over private space they attach value to their private space. The feeling that one is the host who has more knowledge, possesses more resources and holds more rights to a given space, can in turn, reject another from entering that given space.

What seems evident from this empirical work is that a host often wants to be hospitable because of one or a combination of factors. First, the host genuinely takes a liking to their guests and wants to spend time with them. Second, they want to prove to their guests that the place where they are living has value. Third, the hosts have little or no interactions with anyone beyond CouchSurfing.org and find hospitality a chance to interact with another individual. And last, the host wants to make a good impression on their guests in order to guarantee that their guest provides them with a positive review/feedback on the CouchSurfing website.

The more these technologies advance their design and adopt detailed information regarding the host and guest, the easier it is for the host to engage in these 'fantasies of control'. The decision as to which guests will or will not be welcomed can only be made once the host has gathered certain information about the guest. CouchSurfing offers users to create an online profile with over a dozen variables to fill in details about oneself. A user must fill in their age, gender and country of origin as well as occupation, but also space to describe their favourite moment in life, their life mission or their personal 'philosophy'. This level of detail provides a potential host with a number of justifications to either accept or reject that guest.

The possibility to provide such details online is thus part of the technology of hospitality that enables strangers to renegotiate boundaries and processes of familiarization online and face to face. This feature, along with the familiarization process outlined in the previous section enables new forms of hospitality and new social roles within hospitality to arise.

Moreover, this familiarization process in particular helps establish certain boundaries between host and guest. With the feeling of control over certain spaces, hosts also place certain *expectations* on how their guests should *act* in that given space. For example, a common expectation of a host would be for the guest to be active – which often means both physically active (eager to tour, often independently), as well as mentally and emotionally active (inquisitive and open for dialogue). Adam had the power to refuse hospitality – giving him a 'fantasy of control' where he could choose whom to be hospitable to. A similar fantasy was displayed in Adam's judgement system when choosing his guests based on compatibility and his own subjective preferences. A hospitality technology can saturate its users with a plethora of personal information on which to base one's judgements and engage in these 'fantasies of control'. The online profile offers hosts the power to choose one member over the other – and the host chooses the visitor (and vice versa) based on the perceived ease of interaction. Thus, the profile helps (1) a guest or host to express who they are and (2) allows the host or guest to discern if the given person will be someone they want to interact with. This control – what Derrida defined as the key deterrent in executing absolute hospitality – begins prior to the

face-to-face meeting. The more space a technology of hospitality provides for the user to express personal details about themselves, the more room a host has to engage in a fantasy of control. Thanks to the detailed design aspects of certain technologies of hospitality, hosts are able to subjectively choose to whom they will give their hospitality. Jason, an American CouchSurfer once asked me, 'What if somebody homeless just joined CouchSurfing? And asked me to stay on my couch? It's hard, but there are limits. I don't think I'd let them in'. Fantasies of control situate strangers into certain roles – where one holds the power and the other must comply.

Beyond the fantasies of control, technologies of hospitality also hold rules of explicit and implicit reciprocity. 'Everything at present is a misfortune because, in the final analysis, it must be reciprocated. [...] the initial act is an attack on the freedom of the one who receives it (Bourdieu 1998: 94). Those who engage in technologies of hospitality must engage in forms of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1998) that also help provide meaning to any given relationship, but also strip away the notion of altruistic, absolute hospitality as mentioned earlier. Yet another product of interaction that occurs within technologies of hospitality is the act of explicit and implicit reciprocity. As we have seen, conversation becomes a form of implicit reciprocity within technologies of hospitality where money is not exchanged. Yet, once money enters the exchange, a guest feels that he or she has reciprocated and does not have to engage in a form of implicit reciprocity.

CONCLUSION

This article explored the tensions found in the act of hospitality, and explained how such acts are coordinated through a technology of hospitality like CouchSurfing.org, underlining that meetings between strangers who use such technologies also differs from commercial hospitality or friend/family hospitality. While one cannot deny the fact that there are cases in which strangers meet during chance encounters and become acquainted with one another, sometimes befriending, trusting, comforting, understanding and supporting one another, technologies of hospitality foster closeness between strangers due to the roles strangers are forced to adopt, and the settings in which these strangers must be hospitable. This was shown using the empirical example of CouchSurfing.org, in hopes that the issues raised can also be applied to other technologies that are increasingly being used today as the Internet provides users with more opportunities to take their interactions offline – including online hitchhiking websites, hobby-based meet-up websites, house sharing websites and other forms of online-offline exchanges.

While chance encounters on airplanes or trains can also lead to conversation, power relationships found in the host – guest relationship helps dictate the nature of a conversation between two strangers. This conversational element is unique to technologies of hospitality where one party often has to listen while the other speaks, and the person with the most power in the relationship has a choice of whether or not to be the speaker or listener.

Creating new links in one's social network is also about understanding the way in which to interact with strangers. There is a level of cultural capital and network capital needed in order to be mobile and hospitable – and the more people use and understand such technologies, the more potential there is to develop such capital or 'currency of reciprocity' that underpins the informal economies of CouchSurfing.

These technologies of hospitality enable people living in mobile network societies to become strategically closer with strangers at an unprecedented scale, and in unprecedented ways. Undoubtedly, these new forms of interactions invite further research into the conflicts and societal benefits that are arising through the use of such technologies. Further investigation into the socio-structural motivations of using such technologies of hospitality, the longevity of such interactions and other sociocultural or socio-psychological contexts must undoubtedly be explored in order to fully gain a grasp of the impacts of using such technologies.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

- Bialski, P. (2011), 'Technologies of hospitality: How planned encounters develop between strangers', *Hospitality & Society* 1: 3, pp. 245–260, doi: 10.1386/hosp.1.3.245_1

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