

**Creating a better world, one committee-based decision at a time:**  
Organizational governance and participant motivation in online hospitality exchange  
communities

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**The Cooperation Project**

## About The Cooperation Project

Within the Cooperation project at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, the online case studies research group is a focused team of researchers working with Berkman Center Faculty Co-Director Yochai Benkler on an initiative to survey and explore the broad landscape of online cooperation. By examining an expansive swath of cases, the group aims to develop a deeper understanding of the varieties of communities and cooperation that exist in the Internet landscape. This will enable us to develop an evolving taxonomy of design levers – such as reputation systems or particular group norms – that can inform future attempts to foster online cooperation. Ultimately, we aim to loosen this emphasis on the online space; it is hoped that the insights from our research will also be relevant to studying cooperation in offline groups and organizations.

## Key Findings

- 1) Over the past decade online hospitality exchange communities have expanded to include over a million global participants. These web-based social networks rely on common systems and social practices to sustain offline interactions between participants, including the accommodation of travelers in one's private home. These
- 2) Online hospitality exchange communities rely more on participants' intrinsic motivations than on external incentives or controls to guide behavior and sustain activity. Specifically, these sites give authority to each individual user's "personal standard of comfort," thereby empowering all participants to police the boundary between appropriate interaction and abuse.
- 3) Several hospitality exchange sites rely on primarily on user-volunteers to carry out the site's technical and administrative operations. While this practice is compatible with the ideals, missions, and values of hospitality exchange, it creates unique challenges for decision makers who are ultimately responsible for governing the website as an organization. The entangled history of three prominent hospitality exchange websites illustrates how legitimate but un-resolvable disagreements over issues like accountability, ownership, and control can arise in an otherwise highly functional cooperative community.
- 4) Future studies should consider that standards for cooperative behavior become ambiguous in the contested border region between offline organization and online community. Given this dynamic, researchers

should consider the implicit normative impacts of their claims about cooperative behavior on participants in cooperative systems.

### **About The Author**

Roxanna Myhrum is fascinated by how ideas impact social and historical outcomes. For the past year she has been a research assistant in the Berkman Center's Cooperation Research group; she is also a research associate at Harvard Business School. Roxanna is a graduate of Harvard where she wrote her award-winning Social Studies thesis on how the idea that disability is a social construct became distorted by political compromise during the disability rights movement. As part of her interdisciplinary studies, Roxanna also conducted cognition research in the lab for developmental studies ("the baby lab"). In addition to her scholarly work, Roxanna has applied her enthusiasm for governance and big ideas to several organizations including a political campaign, a technology start up, and an artist-run opera company. She lives in Boston and, according to her several profiles on hospitality exchange websites, she is occasionally available to host strangers at her apartment.

## Introduction

Online hospitality exchange, or the provisioning of free accommodation to travelers through a web-based social network, has emerged as a popular and increasingly mainstream activity over the past decade. While this practice has an ancient pedigree rooted in traditions of sharing one's home with needy travelers, the Internet has allowed globally dispersed participants to sign up for large online communities that facilitate trust and produce unprecedented amounts of exchange between strangers. While these online communities vary in their total number of users and in their volume of offline interactions, they all report success in facilitating and sustaining "positive" offline interactions between users. This entails not only the creation of a system for overcoming modern social taboos against interacting with strangers, but also the maintenance of a system that resists abuse from predators.

In studies of cooperative communities, scholars have drawn attention to the role played by "intrinsic motivation" when rule-based policies and external incentives (such as monetary compensation) are not the primary drivers of user activity. A common feature of online hospitality exchange is the "personal standard of comfort," or the global rule that no user is ever under any contractual obligation to do anything outside of his or her comfort zone—all actions on or offline are governed by personal feelings regarding personal safety and appropriate behavior. Observation shows that participants in these communities make use of tools such as profiles, peer-ratings, and open-ended forums to express their preferences, learn what others expect of them, and establish cultural norms on the site. With the collective output of this social system is on the order of 1.5 million free accommodation exchanges (and growing), combined with less quantifiable outputs such as cultural appreciation and friendships, online hospitality exchange ranks as one of the Web's most successful examples of online cooperation. The apparent success of a digitally brokered "personal standard of comfort" in regulating a potentially risky offline human interaction invites us to ask how far this standard can be stretched as an effective means of governing participants in a cooperative online project. This paper examines the limits of that ability in the entangled history of three prominent hospitality exchange websites. Their history illustrates how legitimate but un-resolvable disagreements over issues like accountability, ownership, and control can arise in an otherwise highly functional cooperative community. The case of the BeWelcome volunteer community, initially constituted of defectors from CouchSurfing and Hospitality Club demonstrates how participants whose intrinsic motivations are highly aligned with a site's stated goals can nevertheless become highly disenchanted the organization ultimately responsible for structuring their activity.

Given this dynamic, the case invites researchers to consider expanding the study of cooperative system design to encompass the motivational impacts of factors such as organizational governance, leadership style, and marketing strategy, as these all appear to have the capacity to crowd out intrinsic motivations. Beyond this, however, is a normative question about the extent to which governance matters once sustainable cooperative activity has already been achieved.

This paper takes a hybrid approach to presenting this case. Section I describes some of the cultural and organizational predecessors of online hospitality exchange focusing on the case of Servas International. Section II presents observations from several hospitality exchange websites and discusses the Website design elements that harness intrinsic motivations in support of cooperative behavior. Section III presents the story of BeWelcome as told through the perspective of highly motivated volunteers who became dissatisfied with certain practices at Couchsurfing and Hospitality Club. Section IV discusses the implications of these findings for future scholars and practitioners.

While some variations between sites exist, the most prominent hospitality exchange sites have several features in common: they are ostensibly not-for-profit ventures; their founders are young idealists with international travel experience; and they rely on user-volunteers to support their operations, including development and maintenance of the technological infrastructure of the site.

## **Section I: Cultural and Institutional Precursors of Hospitality Exchange Websites**

Building on the ancient informal practice of hospitality towards travelers, many modern organizations have developed formal systems for providing participants with free or low-cost accommodation as a way to inculcate values, build community, and appreciate cultural difference. One familiar example comes from the educational domain, whereby families work with institutions (governments, agencies, schools) to arrange foreign hospitality exchange so that their children may experience living abroad.<sup>1</sup> In the social domain, some fraternal

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<sup>1</sup> The student exchange organization “AFS” is one example of an organization that facilitates such experiences. Veit Kühne, the founder of Hospitality Club, was inspired by AFS and continues to volunteer in and recruit club members from the organization. More information about the organization and its founding by American Field Service ambulance

organizations facilitate hospitality exchange as a service for their members and as a way to promote community across a geographically dispersed membership. Examples include Mensa's SIGHT Network (Service of Information, Guidance, and Hospitality to Travelers) and the International Police Association.<sup>2</sup> In the service domain, organizations such as WWOOF (Worldwide Workers on Organic Farms) emphasize the tangible contributions that service-oriented travelers can make by immersing themselves in an agricultural community for an extended period of time.<sup>3</sup>

Servas International is the largest and most prominent example of offline hospitality exchange. This organization pioneered a global system for accommodating travelers and established a precedent for volunteer participation that directly influenced the founders of some online hospitality exchange communities and set the cultural expectations for their organizations. Originally founded in 1949 by Bob Luitweiler (1918–2008) Servas positions itself as a peace movement carried forth by volunteers through hospitality exchange and advocacy events, including collaborations with NGOs and the United Nations.<sup>4</sup> Currently the organization has approximately 16,000 registered hosts, and accepts a varying number (“thousands”) of travelers every year.<sup>5</sup> For Servas, hospitality exchange is an act undertaken by citizens who share a vision for peaceful co-existence, and who are committed to building peace by exploring different cultural perspectives through travel and welcoming travelers to share in daily life—as well as through traditional peace advocacy activities. According to the site, “Servas visits can play a vital role in bringing harmony to a troubled world...in the context of the ancient guest-host relationship, our members...[foster change] on this person-to-person level that Servas seeks to foster change. Hospitality and cultural education are our weapons against the spread of misconceptions which can lead to mistrust, antagonism and war.”<sup>6</sup>

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volunteers after the two world wars is available at Learn More, [http://www.afs.org/afs\\_or/view/learn](http://www.afs.org/afs_or/view/learn) (accessed on 8/31/09).

<sup>2</sup> Information on Mensa and the IPA is available at: <http://www.us.mensa.org/Content/AML/NavigationMenu/Programs/SIGHT/SIGHT.htm> and <http://www.ipa-usa.org/index.php> (accessed on 8/31/09).

<sup>3</sup> Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms, <http://www.woof.org/> (accessed on 8/31/09).

<sup>4</sup> Servas International website, <http://joomla.servas.org/> (accessed on 8/28/09).

<sup>5</sup> US Servas website. <http://www.usservas.org/pdfs/servas-hl-stats-20090715.pdf> (accessed on 8/28/09).

<sup>6</sup> US Servas website, <http://www.usservas.org/about.html#gov> (accessed on 8/28/09).

Servas's idealistic mission informs both its governance structure and its procedural operations. Servas annually publishes a directory of official Servas "hosts" which may be accessed by Servas "travelers." Participants are approved through a distributed, regional in-person interview process to ensure that their values are aligned with those of the organization. After being approved, travelers receive a list of hosts and a letter of introduction that is valid for 12 months. Travelers are expected to coordinate their plans directly with their hosts, and to write a travel report upon completion of their trip reflecting on the value of their experience. While hosts pay to be listed in the directory and travelers are required to put down a refundable deposit before they are given a list, the amounts are nominal and meant to cover operating costs. In general, hospitality exchange at Servas is very different from seeking paid accommodation or paying guests: rather, travelers and hosts derive value from sharing a "desire to help build world peace, goodwill, and mutual understanding."<sup>7</sup>

Servas is overseen by the non-profit organization "Servas International." The organization distributes the work needed to sustain its operations—such as interviewing travelers—to volunteers on a country by country basis. Members report to a volunteer national secretary, who works with the hosting community to establish the country's policies and procedures. Every three years Servas convenes a "General Assembly" with one delegate and observers from each participating country. There, members vote on policies and initiatives and elect an executive committee and regional "area coordinators" to carry out decisions. For the Servas community, this participatory democratic organizational structure demonstrates confidence in the decision-making capacity of worldwide members whose shared values make them the best stewards of the organization.

While Servas and its branches operate websites, the organization facilitates hospitality exchange in a thoroughly offline way. Servas annually publishes a printed directory of official Servas hosts which may be accessed by Servas travelers. Participants are approved through an in-person interview process which can take months to schedule and complete. Some Servas branches (U.S. Servas included) require travelers to sign a pledge that they will not share the Servas host list with anyone outside of the organization. While initial applications to the program may now be made through the Servas website, some branches of the organization have recently reassured their user community that Servas will continue to be run almost entirely as an offline operation.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> US Servas website, <http://www.usservas.org/traveler.html> (accessed on 8/28/09).

<sup>8</sup> The United States branch of Servas is currently exploring a "technology alliance" with CouchSurfing. This appears to be a cautious—and

In all of these examples, it is clear that while hospitality exchange might save travelers money or provide hosts with entertainment, the activity is sustained by appealing to more than the economic value participants derive from the transaction. For Servas, hospitality exchange is a volunteer-supported activity that emerges out of a shared desire to promote peace and community on a global scale. The organization's screening and implementation processes are all directed towards engaging these values at an individual level so that the community's ideals might be achieved. Participants regard the non-profit and democratic parent organization, as aligned with these ideals. While the governing procedures and hosting processes are sometimes lengthy and cumbersome to administer on a global scale, they nevertheless have sustained this organization and its hospitality exchange activity for 60 years.

## Section II: Motivating and Sustaining Online Hospitality Exchange

Over the past decade online hospitality exchange has gone from a geeky fringe pursuit to a well-established worldwide phenomenon. The three largest sites, Global Freeloaders, Hospitality Club, and CouchSurfing, have a collective membership of over 1.5 million.<sup>9</sup>

Common Features of Popular Hospitality Exchange Websites					
Site	# users (appx)		Volunteer staff?	Global Mission Statement	Age(s) of Founder(s)
CouchSurfing	1.3 million	Not-for-profit (not official)	Yes	"Participate in creating a better world, one couch at a time"	26; mid twenties
Hospitality Club	550,000	Not-for-profit (not official)	Yes	building a "world wide web of friendly people...to promote peace."	22

controversial—step. Technology Alliance, [http://www.usservas.org/cs\\_technology\\_alliance.html](http://www.usservas.org/cs_technology_alliance.html) (accessed on 8/31/09).

<sup>9</sup> As of August 2009 membership reported by each site was approximately 60,000 (Global Freeloaders), 550,000 (Hospitality Club) and 1.3 million (CouchSurfing).

Global Freeloaders	60,000	Not-for-profit (not official)	(No)	"...Save money and make new friends whilst seeing the world from a local's perspective."	24
BeWelcome	7,000	Not-for-profit (official)	Yes	"At BeWelcome we believe sharing creates a better world."	Multiple generations

While distinct in their aesthetic and technical design, these and other sites demonstrate remarkable similarity in their approach to creating an online community that sustains positive offline hospitality exchange experiences. In all cases, common deference to an individual's personal standard of comfort allows users to judge each other's trustworthiness on and off the site. Structured observation across this set of sites suggests that other design features such as ideological rhetoric, formal reputation systems, and community-enforced communication norms target users' intrinsic motivations and sustain participation while lowering the risk of abuse.

Before discussing these common attributes, it is important to recognize that hospitality exchange as a web-based service does not inherently require complex cooperative system design. At minimum a hospitality exchange web interface must facilitate user sign up and maintain basic individual information in a database (minimally a user's contact information and geographic locator, although other personal information could be kept as well). It must then have a geographically-based search function so travelers can locate potential hosts, and a tool or protocol for coordinating travel plans. In order to sustainably support hospitality exchange activity, a site must also have a somewhat responsive and geographically diverse membership with a balance of travelers and hosts. A few examples of this sort of "barebones" hospitality website do exist: stay4free, registered in 1997, was one of the earliest hospitality exchange networks online. Billing itself as the "First International Free Accommodation Network," the site is an online registry that allows users to enter and search for each other's contact information based on geography. While technically this qualifies as hospitality

exchange, stay4free shares more in common with a different breed of sites used to coordinate “house swaps” or “home exchanges,” such as “HomeLink.org,” or “HomeExchange.com,” which charges a fee for its services.<sup>10</sup>

While these “house swap” sites illustrate the minimum technical architecture needed for “exchange,” observation indicates that they are sufficiently distinct from hospitality exchange websites way so as to warrant a different category of interpretation. In practice hospitality exchange websites exhibit numerous features that support the building and maintenance of a cooperative community, rather than just a market for exchanging goods. Participants in hospitality exchange communities need to be able to trust one another to a) behave appropriately as travelers, b) provide reliable and safe accommodation as hosts, c) not misuse personal data revealed to the site or members of the community, and d) not exploit their personal relationship once it is no longer subject to direct enforcement by the site. Sites accomplish this by appealing to users’ intrinsic motivations to participate in a variety of ways.

**Personal Standard of Comfort** – While many sites have rule enforcement mechanisms for detecting site abusers and criminals, most sites rely on recruiting trustworthy people who share common values to build their communities. When users first sign up for hospitality exchange websites, they are informed while entering their personal contact information that they are never under an obligation to host or stay with anyone they do not want to. In no case is transacting fully automated; all interaction between users is explicitly subject to their own discretionary feeling of comfort. GlobalFreeloaders explains the personal standard of comfort best:

“GlobalFreeloaders can accommodate other members wherever, whenever and as often as they like. Whether its only for one night or for a hundred. Whether its before, after or during your own travels. Some people enjoy the company and cultural exchange that comes with hosting. Others will find it less enjoyable. It is completely up to each GlobalFreeloader to decide how accommodating they want to be.... Hosts can acquaint themselves with potential Guests for as long as they like, before agreeing to accommodate them. You are not obligated in any way to

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<sup>10</sup> HomeLink International, <http://www.homelink.org/index.jsp> (accessed on 8/31/09) and HomeExchange, <http://www.homeexchange.com>, (accessed on 8/31/09).

accommodate anyone. At GlobalFreeloaders.com you are in control.”<sup>11</sup>

The personal standard of comfort is meant to guide positive interaction between users, as well as to encourage users to be vigilant and avoid interactions which they feel are not in keeping with the purpose or mission of the site. It is also encourages users to take responsibility for governing their own interactions, as no absolute objective standard exists for regulating user behavior.<sup>12</sup>

In practice, the personal standard of comfort has also allowed for hospitality exchange websites to welcome diverse users into the community, particularly those people who, for logistical or emotional reasons, do not want to participate in the core hospitality exchange activity of the site. Such users may feel more inclined to engage in large-group offline social gatherings or interact with other users in digital forums; for the most part, hospitality exchange communities can accommodate this diversity and harness the user’s motivation to affiliate with the site to support other positive offline experiences.

**Idealistic Rhetoric**—Hospitality exchange websites use idealistic rhetoric to orient new users to the site and to encourage idealistic-minded users to use the site when traveling and continue hosting users. The foundation and heartbeat of this idealism in many cases comes from the site founders, who are tend to be young, idealistic, entrepreneurial individuals (or, in BeWelcome’s case, a group) aspiring to operate in a not-for-profit mode. For example, 22-year-old Veit Kühne founded Hospitality Club in 2000 after participating in and volunteering with the AFS student exchange program. While finishing business school, he was inspired by Servas but thought that such a project had the potential to scale massively if the barriers to entry could be lowered by placing the exchange process online. A few sites such as Hospex existed at the time, but Veit did not feel there was a “global, professional solution.” His vision was to use the Internet to build a “world wide web of friendly people,” which he imagined would be a vehicle for fostering inter-cultural

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<sup>11</sup> GlobalFreeloaders New User Information, <http://www.globalfreeloaders.com/newuser.php?lang=EN> (accessed on 8/31/09).

<sup>12</sup> Some sites do remind users that in any country they are bound by the the laws of the land and in cases of criminal abuse, they are instructed to call the police first, and then take action on the site. See CouchSurfing Safety Tips, [http://www.couchsurfing.org/tips\\_for\\_surfers.html](http://www.couchsurfing.org/tips_for_surfers.html), (accessed on 8/31/09).

understanding and world peace.<sup>13</sup> Veit, as well as the founders of GlobalFreeLoaders, CouchSurfing, and BeWelcome, all have user profiles and participate in hospitality exchange through their sites. All have a record of positive comments and friendships worldwide; frequently, they are available to host travelers. The active participatory role played by the founders humanizes the projects, allows new users to see the websites as communities, and positions the enterprising idealists as role models with an intrinsic desire to do good.

The idealistic orientation persists throughout the sites. Technical features for acquiring free accommodation are embedded in a background of enthusiasm for the ideals of the project. The sites' ideological mission statements (ex: "participate in creating a better world, one couch at a time") are featured prominently on multiple pages; CouchSurfing's registration process even requests that new users formulate personal mission statements. The sites feature testimonials from current users that emphasize the life-changing, eye-opening, soul-enriching aspects of their off-site experiences and attest to the substantial value of community well beyond the cost-savings of the trip. An example from GlobalFreeloaders reads:

"I remember being overwhelmed with cheer that there was another person out there that wasn't afraid to live life and meet new people, even allow them to stay in their own home having never met them before."<sup>14</sup>

And from CouchSurfing:

"I remember my first CS experience. And I know I cannot forget it ever. All time when I see someone from CS, I feel like he/she is my family. Coz We are the member of same big family, Couch Surfing. And having a big family brings more responsibility but life is full of it."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The Hospitality Club foundation story can be found here: <http://www.hospitalityclub.org/hospitalityclub/about.htm>. Similar stories are available for Global Freeloaders: <http://www.globalfreeloaders.com/newuser.php?lang=EN> and Couchsurfing: <http://www.couchsurfing.org/about.html#> (accessed on 8/31/09).

<sup>14</sup> GlobalFreeLoaders, <http://www.globalfreeloaders.com/experience.php> (accessed on 8/28/09).

<sup>15</sup> Couchsurfing, <http://www.couchsurfing.org/testimonials.html?skip=60&> (accessed on 8/28/09). These testimonials all periodically cycle onto the homepage.

Hospitality exchange sites all strive to combine a useful and well-functioning service with less tangible community-oriented goals such as “peace” or “cultural understanding.” The “positive experiences” reported by users are presented by sites in the context of their ideological missions, and support the connection between ideological rhetoric, personal experience, and intrinsic reward.

**User Profiles and Reputation Systems** – Hospitality exchange sites request that users fill out an extensive profile before searching for or offering accommodation. While the exact fields differ from site to site, all sites request that users provide information beyond basic contact information about their interests, personality, previous travel experiences, and worldview. The sites emphasize the value of profile completeness as a way to demonstrate trustworthiness to others and to display motivational alignment with the values of the site. Hospitality Club calls the profile “the heartpiece of Hospitality Club,” and tells users they can help make the site a success by having a complete profile.<sup>16</sup> The sites warn that a hastily prepared or incomplete profile signals a free rider attitude and a lack of trustworthiness to other users. Profiles therefore invite users to consider their motivations for participating in the community, and balance proclaim their community oriented traits (being friendly, working for advocacy groups) over their displays of self-interest (being cheap, seeking free accommodation).

Once an offline experience coordinated through the site has taken place, users are requested to return to each other’s profiles to comment on their experiences. A person’s character reputation is transportable across both sides of the hospitality transaction (host and guest) and can be vouched for by friends or acquaintances. Occasionally a host’s accommodations will also develop an independent reputation due to comments about the quality of his or her lodgings made separately from the comments about his or her behavior.

Recommendations are also understood to be important “safety features” on hospitality exchange websites. As opposed to a strictly-enforced top-down approach to policing, recommendations allow users to monitor and report on each other’s behavior. In addition to open-ended commenting tools, several sites provide users with social networking features that allow them to identify trustworthy or friendly individuals.<sup>17</sup> These include the “vouching” and “trust” features on CouchSurfing and Hospitality Club respectively. This approach elevates the importance of subjective assessment and encourages users to be

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<sup>16</sup> Hospitality Club, <http://tour.hospitalityclub.org/tour5.htm> (accessed on 8/28/09)

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, the CouchSurfing “Safety” page: <http://www.couchsurfing.org/safety.html> (accessed on 8/31/09)

vigilant with their feelings rather than deferring to administrators to police the community.

Writing honest feedback can be tricky due to user sensitivity about evaluating an interaction initiated in a spirit of generosity or trust. One CouchSurfing administrator reported in a public talk that some cultural groups have demonstrated consistent aversion to providing negative feedback.<sup>18</sup> Such aversion demonstrates how users regard the reputation system as an extension of their social community rather than as a mere reporting system for past transactions.<sup>19</sup> While some users might deserve a negative comment because of rudeness or bad behavior, there is potentially a large amount of emotion and subjectivity involved when evaluating an interaction. Sites therefore make an effort to educate community members about the importance of both positive and negative recommendations to the overall mission of the site. They also emphasize the time and thought that should go into a recommendation, especially when there is the possibility that a dispute might exist as the result of a misunderstanding.<sup>20</sup> In these cases, the sites' invoke their higher social aims and request that users discuss their experiences candidly and come to an understanding over differences of opinion.

**Rules and Community–Enforced Communication Norms** – Every hospitality exchange experience is unique and formulating rules that apply in most situations is very difficult. Therefore, sites tend to keep formal rules to a minimum (ex: no exchanging money, no spam, no using the site as a dating service) and instead point users to “tips for travelers” or “guides to being a good host.” These texts typically focus on how to deal with complicated offline social situations, such as how to handle a cultural misunderstanding, what to do if a host/traveler does not appear when expected, or how to react to unwanted sexual attention. These guides especially counsel women to take extra precaution while traveling, as the risk of certain crimes such as sexual assault or attack is known to be higher for them, especially when traveling unaccompanied in foreign countries.

All of the sites emphasize the limits of their enforcement power, especially in offline interactions. While tactics like CouchSurfing's credit

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<sup>18</sup> Daniel Hoffer, “CouchSurfing: What one website reveals about the future of the Net.” Talk given at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society, April 7, 2009. Available at <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/interactive/events/2009/04/couchsurfing>.

<sup>19</sup> In contrast, the reputation system used on Amazon.com for evaluating vendor service does not trigger similar aversion.

<sup>20</sup> See CouchSurfing's guide to negative references: <http://www.couchsurfing.org/references.html#whenReferenceNegative> (accessed on 8/31/09).

card identity verification service and Hospitality Club's passport-checking requirement might dissuade vandals to some extent, individual users are still responsible for maintaining trust and community against this backdrop of risk.

Given this low level of top-down intervention in community affairs, users are motivated to create their own tactics for sustaining good behavior. Some users, especially those living in popular destinations who receive numerous requests for accommodation, have developed innovative ways to coordinate and filter potential guests. Many compose lengthy standards for how others ought to communicate a housing request to them. These might be generic requirements, such as asking that potential guests write an introduction listing the things they feel they have in common with the host; or they may be considerably more specialized, such as an instruction that all requestors tailor their correspondence to suit the host's interests or open their correspondence with an asterisk.<sup>21</sup> Only those who take the time to read the complete text of the profile—thereby getting to know the host and appreciating the time he spent on making his own introduction—will be recognized; others will simply be ignored. Site administrators report that experienced users are adept at interpreting a user's intentions from his or her profile or hospitality request, and take care to avoid interacting with individuals they deem suspicious or inauthentic in their desire to pursue a meaningful exchange.<sup>22</sup>

The user community also influences behavior standards in forums, groups, wikis, or in offline gatherings. There are numerous examples of user attempts to exert peer pressure on new users to align them with community values. One specific example is user-generated rules against "freeloaders," generally defined as individuals who seek accommodation as a free service, without making an effort to build relationships or community. On CouchSurfing, such instructions exist on a series of wikis with tips for hosts and travelers ("How to be a good guest," etc).<sup>23</sup> On Hospitality Club, placed an extensive plea in the Hospitality Club forum:

Welcome to the club!

Undoubtedly the idea of free accommodation worldwide prompted

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Arnoud van Rooij, <http://www.couchsurfing.org/profile.html?id=4IIXYJK> (accessed on 8/31/09).

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Hoffer, public talk, <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/interactive/events/2009/04/couchsurfing> (accessed on 8/31/09).

<sup>23</sup> CouchSurfing – Travel Tips, <http://www.couchsurfing.org/tips.html> (accessed on 8/31/09).

you to seek membership, or perhaps the desire to have the people of the world visit with you? Interestingly enough, many newcomers join on Day 1, – and on Day 2 they enter the forum with their travel plans – and expectations of willing hosts for themselves (and maybe their 2 or 3 friends) for any number of days in all the overrun tourist places of the world.

Friends, why don't you PLEASE read along in the forum for a week or so, just to get a feel for this organization? Offer your knowledge about your locale, your experiences, travel tips and suggestions in that public forum BEFORE you approach anybody for hospitality. And then ask members privately whether you may visit with them. Remember, nobody OWES you!... All of it takes a little time to get used to. You simply have to allow for that time to become a real member, one is more than just a seeker of that free bed. And – good luck! <sup>24</sup>

These and other community–enforced communication norms show how experienced users feel empowered to act on their own feelings and experiences about what makes hospitality exchange work by exhorting others to maintain a considerate and community–oriented mindset. Again, external pressure from other users takes the form of appealing to internal sentiment about the right way to behave.

The above mentioned features demonstrate how intrinsic motivation can be channeled to sustain cooperative activity on hospitality exchange websites. This list of features is not meant to be a blueprint for building a successful or active hospitality network; rather, they describe the common features that a variety of these sites display in practice, and that appear to be important to members of these communities. However, this analysis is limited to the “in–world” dynamics on the sites—aside from the presence of the founders in the user community and the general orientation towards not–for–profit operations, these features are divorced from the administrative organizations and decision–making processes that brought them about. As the following section indicates, in systems that engage users’ intrinsic motivations to participate, back end, organizational dynamics can have considerable impact on front end, user behavior.

### **SECTION III: Governance, Leadership, and the Organizational Conditions of Motivation**

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<sup>24</sup> Hospitality Club, <http://secure.hospitalityclub.org/hc/forum.php?action=DisplayMessage&StartMessageId=280749> (accessed on 8/17/09).

The two most popular hospitality exchange sites, CouchSurfing and Hospitality Club, have relied on the contributions of thousands of volunteers to build, coordinate, and sustain their operations.<sup>25</sup> Beyond participating in the core hospitality exchange activity, volunteering on these sites is seen as an additional way for users to act on their motivation to sustain community and realize their ideals. CouchSurfing explains that, “[Volunteer] participation is what makes this community work.... CouchSurfing encourages members to take ownership of the site and its development. We strive to create a climate where members' ideas are encouraged and implemented. We have an organizational structure in place that welcomes volunteers in an abundance of ways.”<sup>26</sup> Both CouchSurfing and Hospitality Club have formal policies and application/entry processes for their volunteer networks and require evidence of trustworthiness (ex: profile completion) and a positive record of community involvement (ex: recommendations from former hosts) before a significant volunteer role will be assigned. Volunteers gain status (indicated by exclusive group membership and/or profile symbols) and authority (access to privileged areas of the site or confidential information) by volunteering.

Volunteers appear to be motivated by a variety of aims, ranging from a desire to program or debug cool site features to a desire to contribute to the higher aims the hospitality exchange projects espouse (world peace; world community). While volunteers, like participants, may be motivated to serve based on their personal sense of reward, once engaged as volunteers they become subject to the policies and procedures that have been put in place to sustain the site as an organization.

Beginning in 2005 a group of volunteers from Hospitality Club began losing their motivation to participate in the site due to an ongoing dispute with the site founder over organizational governance and transparency. They were soon joined by volunteers from CouchSurfing who took issue with that site's marketing strategy and development process. These volunteers ultimately joined together to found another organization, BeVolunteer, with its own hospitality exchange website, BeWelcome.org.

The following account explores the impact that organizational policy and governance had on two highly active volunteers who left

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<sup>25</sup> Hospitality Club has a core group of around 50 volunteers (contributing at least once weekly) and around 2,500 occasional volunteers. CouchSurfing has 7 paid staff and around 1,500 volunteers organized into different “career” paths.

<sup>26</sup> CouchSurfing FAQ, <http://www.couchsurfing.org/help.html>, (accessed on 8/31/09).

CouchSurfing and Hospitality Club after an extended period of service.<sup>27</sup> Their experiences show how even in situations where there is complete dedication to a site's core cooperative activity, issues with organizational governance can interfere with a participant's motivations.

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"This is just ridiculous." So began a June 2006 TechCruch article on the sudden and startling entry of CouchSurfing into the site's infamous "deadpool." A few hours earlier, site founder Casey Fenton had posted a letter to the CouchSurfing community indicating that, in a "perfect storm" of system failures CouchSurfing had irretrievably lost a dozen data files. Casey's letter conveyed deep emotional concern for the CouchSurfing community, as well as a sense of personal fatigue, weariness, and defeat:

CouchSurfing was born out of a dream I had to meet the most interesting people in world and experience their cultures, and it grew into a living, thriving family of almost a hundred thousand. This community has blossomed in beautiful ways I hadn't even anticipated. It was no longer about what I got to experience, but rather, what genuine, heartfelt good this community can offer the world... I saw in CS, *in you*, the power to change not only they way we travel, but change the world itself...

I have devoted the last three years of my life to CouchSurfing. I have literally poured every cent I have into the site. I've sacrificed my health, my time, and my own ability to travel and meet people. In many ways I've put my life and wanderlust on hold to build this network. I'm not complaining; it's been a fantastic ride. As devastating as it is to consider, it looks like the ride is over.<sup>28</sup>

In the following days, CouchSurfing members began to speak out about the overnight loss of their community. Casey saw hundreds of e-mails and posts containing heartfelt stories about the positive impact the site had made on people's lives.<sup>29</sup> Many members expressed a desire to help rebuild the site, recover the community, and re-enter the lost data by any means necessary—some volunteered to collect data from Google caches of lost pages. After reflecting on these sentiments, the team of

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<sup>27</sup> This account relies on information collected in personal interviews. Kasper Souren, 7/29/09. Jean-Yves Hegron, 8/17/09.

<sup>28</sup> CouchSurfing Crash Page, [http://www.couchsurfing.org/crash\\_page.html](http://www.couchsurfing.org/crash_page.html) (accessed on 8/20/09).

<sup>29</sup> A sample of these e-mails: [http://www.couchsurfing.org/supporting\\_emails.htm](http://www.couchsurfing.org/supporting_emails.htm) (accessed on 8/31/09).

volunteer programmers (many co-located in Canada at the “Montreal Collective”) and Casey began to rebuild the site.

In addition to the anecdotes about CouchSurfing travel experiences, community members also sent e-mails and posted in CouchSurfing “refugee” forums about their thoughts on the crash in general. While acknowledging Casey’s dedication to the project and its users, some members expressed shock and concern that one man had the power to declare the community dead. Others, particularly self-proclaimed geeks, were critical about CouchSurfing’s system architecture and initiated discussion threads about how its redesign and overhaul. Others focused on the opportunity for Casey to re-envision his approach to volunteer-based work. Such proposals offered competing suggestions, although many imagined a more decentralized technical and organizational administration. Others—including some from within CouchSurfing’s small community of volunteers, took issue with more specific practices, such as Casey’s (modest) salary and position of control over content and contributors.

Kasper Souren, a Wikipedia-enthusiast and hitchhiker with an MSc in math, found his way to Montreal a few months after the crash. He had previously found lodging through CouchSurfing and, from what he could observe, the site seemed totally compatible with the ethic of sharing that he applauded in other communities like wikis and open source software projects. “I didn’t really have clear goals...I thought it would be a good idea to have a wiki for travel guides and things like that.” Once in Montreal, Kasper observed ways that wikis could improve workflow, and set up ways for volunteers to collaborate without e-mailing documents back and forth. He also began working on code. “I was annoyed by some bugs on the website. I just started working on them...I got really addicted to working on it.”

As he met with contributors in residence at the collective, Kasper was struck by the centralized control Casey still had over CouchSurfing 2.0. Additionally, he found it peculiar that given the organization’s relative informality, he was asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement that included a non-compete clause and would give CouchSurfing ownership over his work. Kasper was a strong believer in free software principles himself and “found the NDA pretty silly,” but thought that unless he signed it “I wouldn’t have an opportunity to improve it.” Additionally, he wanted to “give back to the community that allowed me to keep on traveling.” So, in spite of some reservations, he signed on, excited to be working on a meaningful project with dedicated people. That, and the collective had free lunch.

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It was a beautiful day in the Normandy countryside. In the summer of 2005, hundreds of people sat outside at a small family farm enjoying sunshine, food, and each other's company. Many had never met in person until this event. Drawn from all over Europe, (and some from overseas), they had come to the first ever 'Monnai Summer Camp' in a spirit of friendship, sharing, and fun.

Pierre-Charles Marais, a very active member and volunteer of Hospitality Club had arranged the event. Over the past few years he and his family had successfully hosted numerous travelers, and in 2004 Pierre-Charles had attended the first ever "HC Summer Camp" at the house of the site's founder, Veit Kühne, in Dresden. Once the idea of holding a large-scale multi-day event in the beautiful countryside took root, plans began to move ahead quickly. With them came logistical concerns: How would the participants be notified? Who would cover the costs of feeding people? What about accident liabilities? Pierre-Charles embraced the challenge and after discussing the matter with other volunteers he decided to establish an official French organization to back the event so he could accept donations and more easily acquire insurance for his parent's land.

Taking this official step reminded him, as it did for several other Hospitality Club volunteers, that no such official organization existed for Hospitality Club itself. The site had grown rapidly in recent years thanks in large part to Veit's visionary leadership and active international recruitment efforts, and membership in 2005 (when the summer camp was held) was nearing 100,000. Volunteers from all over the world had eagerly signed up to work on improving the site and overall member experience, but after years of steady contribution they began to question the organization's lack of official processes or structure. Many could recall when at a rare in-person meeting even Veit's brother, who had helped him found the site, asked him to disclose his plans for the future. Volunteers were also concerned that Hospitality Club did not have official legal status and that no one other than Veit had official decision-making power. Several individuals had discussed their concerns with Veit but had not made any headway; his view was that the site would be better served if he and the volunteers focused on the tasks at hand rather than spending time on creating a more complicated and cumbersome management structure. If you want to participate in a democratic organization (with all of its added complexity) Veit had told them, then you should join Servas.

One person involved in these conversations was Jean-Yves Hegron, a professional IT project manager who lived in Bretagne with his wife and three children. Hosting world travelers was a fun family activity that appealed to Jean-Yves's sense of community. In 2001 he found his way to Hospitality Club after deciding against joining Servas (too complicated) and TravelHoo (too buggy, now dead). At the time, Hospitality Club also

had its bugs, but the core functionality was sound. After using the site to host some travelers, Jean-Yves had chatted with Veit over the site's IRC and offered to help with programming. He created a technically sophisticated site forum (complete with an autocensor features meant to combat flaming), and, along with another core developer, had helped implement the infrastructure needed to make the site a platform for people to meet. "It was not yet Web 2.0 but it started activity on the site and Hospitality Club started to grow."

As Jean-Yves arrived in the tiny town in Normandy he was impressed by the civilized, thoughtful, and welcoming character of the large diverse group. At meals and around bonfire, he felt good to be part of a community that shared these ideals of hospitality. Still, he knew there was more to this idyllic scene than met the eye. "I was hoping it would change. Since the very beginning I asked Veit, 'Why don't you create some legal organization with a committee instead of one guy deciding everything—the many are more clever than the one.' But he said 'maybe later—I don't want to lose time in discussion, I know exactly what I want to do.'" As Jean-Yves passed a donation to Pierre-Charles for the official Monnai HC Summer Camp fund, he was pleased to hear that any money left over from the event would go to support Hospitality Club, but only on the condition that Veit start making the organizational changes that they and the other volunteers sought. If pleading with the "benevolent dictator" wouldn't work, maybe negotiating with him over assets would.

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It was well past midnight, but Kasper was still awake and charged with adrenaline. Many open windows cluttered his desktop as he simultaneously searched for cheap plane tickets, edited a page on HitchWiki (a site he created), and posted in online discussion forums. Back in Europe after an extended stay working for Couchsurfing in New Zealand, he was now up in arms over the leak of a proposed new non-disclosure agreement. Three other core developers (including a MySQL database programming expert) had quit the CouchSurfing collective and planned to leave New Zealand as soon as possible. While the previous NDA had been an "ongoing annoyance," the new one, which reaffirmed CouchSurfing's copyright over code and disallowed developers from working for "rival" hospitality exchange sites, seemed like a betrayal. Kasper had feared this outcome since he had discussed the issue with CouchSurfing's legal advisor, who seemed inclined towards the intellectual property regime at use in the pharmaceutical industry (and who Kasper thought of as one of Casey's "Burning Man Buddies").<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The annual Burning Man Festival is known for its spirit of sharing, as well as for its hierarchical community structure (and casual drug use). CouchSurfing has had a camp at burning man for several years. See

Kasper's opinion of CouchSurfing's management had vacillated over the past 9-months: while he was flattered when Casey asked him to take on greater responsibility as the tech team's leader, he urged that a "coordinator" title would be more appropriate; while he appreciated receiving free room and board at the collectives, he questioned how this expenditure benefitted the overall community; while he was confident that the development team shared values on hospitality and cultural exchange, he knew they had irreconcilably different opinions with the administrators about open source development and intellectual property.

Kasper clicked over to a relatively new site where he had had been one of the first one hundred users to create a profile. Launched at the beginning of 2007, BeWelcome was a fledgling hospitality exchange website with an audacious energy for its small size. Kasper had heard about BeWelcome while still working in New Zealand, and felt great solidarity with BeWelcome's original founders who had originally tried to exert influence over Hospitality Club by creating an official organization of volunteers known as "HCVol" (HCVolunteer). As they wrote in the site's wiki history, "Since nothing was moving in HC, it was felt that a real counter-power had to be built. It was evident that having a place for the volunteers to work out of Veit's control [could] only be a very productive thing."<sup>31</sup> While many technical features resembled those in use on the bigger sites, BeWelcome had several attributes that greatly appealed to Kasper. The site had a participatory governance structure, its leaders worked without pay and communicated through a wiki, and all of its code was open source. For Kasper, "It was kind of a utopian hospitality exchange network" and, newly in search of a place to stay, it was where he felt most welcome.

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"Some people care about building a utopia where there's peace and everything is free. Some care about doing their part to make the best programs possible. But some people just have a need to exist through organizations, not to improve themselves, exactly, but to find some step forward—they find some role and it gives them a reason to exist...." Jean-Yves had spent a lot of time reflecting on his decade of experience with hospitality exchange sites. He had recently authored a travel guidebook on the subject, *Voyager Presque Gratuit* ("Traveling almost free") and he brought his perspectives to bear in regular conversations with the BeWelcome Board of Directors. Although he still saw himself as

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<http://www.burningman.com/> and <http://www.couchsurfing.org/group.html?gid=434> (accessed on 8/31/09).

<sup>31</sup>BeVolunteer – History of BeVolunteer, [http://www.bevolunteer.org/wiki/index.php?title=History\\_of\\_BeVolunteer&oldid=12205](http://www.bevolunteer.org/wiki/index.php?title=History_of_BeVolunteer&oldid=12205) (accessed on 8/31/09).

a web developer, he realized that he had spent most of his time and energy building something more far more complex. "A website is not an organization...it was the organization that we cared about."

Over the past 3 years the (mostly online) discourse about hospitality exchange governance had showcased the good, the bad, and the ugly. The blog "OpenCouchSurfing" had dozens of contributors and had rapidly grown into a long record of grievances about the biggest sites. Essay-like posts about best practices in community governance, critiques of technical functionality complete with downtime statistics, and personal stories of community exile were interspersed with ad hominem attacks on Casey, Veit, their brothers, other volunteer "conspirators," and various unsavory users.<sup>32</sup> This space, as well as BeWelcome.Info, also included aggressive responses from those still faithful to the parent sites that labeled people like Jean-Yves as uppity ringleaders or subversive miscreants.

"For the last two years, **disgruntled ex-volunteers** have relentlessly attacked HC on all communication channels they could find. We have mostly kept quiet, because we value the work they did in the past for HC and always hoped that differences could be overcome by dialogue, especially among idealistic people who want to make the world a better place through hospitality exchange. Unfortunately, after setting up their own "organization", attacking HC has become a pure necessity for BW and supporters, since it's their **only way to recruit** more volunteers and members. We realize their **attacks will not stop**, so finally we are telling you **what's really going on**. Since we spend most of our volunteer time working productively on HC, improving the site and helping members, we don't have nearly as much time to write long texts and waste time uselessly on these politics. However, it is important that we explain to volunteers and active members who hear about BW what is really going on."<sup>33</sup>

Similar threads could be found in the forums on all three websites as a lasting reminder of past conflict. The auto-censor feature Jean-Yves had programmed into the Hospitality Club forum to restrict flaming had been engaged to filter out posts about rival sites (including "CouchSurfing"); several of the BeWelcome founding members had had their Hospitality Club profiles, complete with years of positive references, deleted.

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<sup>32</sup> A sample of these posts and links to treatises from the 2007 "flame war" can be seen by searching for Kasper's name on OpenCouchSurfing.org

<sup>33</sup> BeWelcome.info, <http://www.bewelcome.info/> (accessed on 8/31/09).

But to what avail? BeWelcome had recruited around 6,000 members although growth had slowed—especially since CouchSurfing began experiencing less frequent downtimes. However, the founding group’s idealism remained strong, although the revolutionary spirit had calmed a bit. Project enthusiasts like Kasper remained dedicated to the site’s ideals, but admitted that the programming and development was less satisfying because there was not enough site activity to really test the architecture.

On the other side, the volunteers who left Hospitality Club and CouchSurfing had been replaced with others who did not seem to mind the leadership’s policies. Couchsurfing continued to grow rapidly, and Hospitality Club’s worldwide membership stayed active on and offline. While Veit began to formally seek input from a group of high-level contributors known as the “Very Active Volunteers,” he still had final decision-making authority and de-facto ownership of the site. Casey likewise remained in a position of control at Couchsurfing, although he and his team had recently reached out to the greater membership in creating a new statement of “guiding principles” for the community. The site reported that an approximate 1.5 million “positive experiences” had been generated there. That included Kasper, who had recently found lodging in New York City through CouchSurfing. And, although his profile was now marked “hidden,” Jean-Yves still kept his door open to Hospitality Club members in need of a place to stay.

#### **Section IV: Discussion and Implications for Future Study**

The case of these hospitality sites raises several important questions for leaders and active participants in online communities. The account presented here reveals legitimate disagreements over specific topics such as financial reporting, decision making structures, and legal incorporation—disagreements that resulted in a decisive and costly separation. One can question whether alternative actions by site leaders would have been more prudent—perhaps greater good would have been achieved had Veit incorporated Hospitality Club, or had Casey brought more people with contrasting opinions onto the Board of Directors. Or perhaps the volunteers could have been more effective had they continued to work within the system to effect long-term change. However, such counterfactuals implicitly rely on a vague metric of success that appears to be contested by participants in this domain.

Daniel Hoffer, a CouchSurfing co-founder, mentioned the case of BeWelcome in a public talk he gave at Harvard, and dismissed the significance of BeWelcome as a CouchSurfing competitor. However, in addressing another question about how the popular site measured its social impact, he reflected on how difficult it was for many social enterprises to produce a “third balance sheet” on such subjective topics.

The experience of some volunteers—albeit a minority—who became disillusioned after dedicating themselves to the success of the project is even more difficult to appraise. Through the entire experience, participants defended their beliefs about governance with strong emotion. However, as Kasper reflected, “A lot of people don’t want to know about [the problems]. The site is great, and there’s over a million members. Maybe Casey is right—maybe it wouldn’t have become this big if it hadn’t been run in this ridiculous way.” At the core of the issue, then, is a more fundamental disagreement about the ultimate relevance of such concerns about governance to sustaining the core mission and activity of the site.

There is a growing literature in social psychology that explores the “crowding out” of internal motivation by external controls. While this is usually studied in relationship to the completion of a single task, the hospitality exchange case alerts us that in complex systems the implications of intrinsic motivation might exist outside of the core activity of the site. Specifically, there appears to be contention over the boundaries where intrinsic motivation has legitimate authority to control behavior. The personal standard of comfort, which successfully engages participant’s intrinsic motivations and sustainably produces cooperative activity, is in limbo for volunteers who feel strongly about organizational reform but lack the authority to implement changes. These volunteers know that organizational management influences their motivation to work, as well as their motivation to participate in the core activity of the site. As Jean-Yves puts it, “I knew...that transparency in the world of volunteers is of utmost importance if you want to keep people motivated and avoid problems—the complete lack of transparency created a lot of problems inside Hospitality Club.” Regardless of whether one agrees with this policy, this perspective indicates the value of extending managerial awareness and scholarly inquiry to include the impact of governance on motivational dynamics: some participants feel as strongly about what’s behind the system as they feel about welcoming strangers into their homes.

The design prescriptions of this observation are ultimately unclear, as they point to a larger underlying normative question about whether participation in governance has intrinsic value, and how that value should be weighed against the strategy or performance of an organization. They do, however, lay the groundwork for further studies, with two research paths being particularly promising.

- 1) In taking up this question, scholars and practitioners might consider the motivational implications of managerial tradeoffs like investing in the recruitment of new users vs. investing in the allegiance and satisfaction of present users. In the hospitality exchange case, this would also mean looking at the impact of

large-scale global membership on qualitative indicators of community and cultural well-being.

- 2) Other approaches might examine the impact of managerial strategies aimed at mitigating this particular dilemma. These might include, for example, a study of how the use of particular reporting or transparency measures related to organizational governance impact the feelings and motivations of site participants and/or contributing volunteers. In the case of hospitality exchange sites, aggregate indicators of user behavior (ex: rate of “trust” tagging between users, total volunteer registration, etc.) could be tracked over the time when a new policy is implemented (ex: Hospitality Club publishing its source code; CouchSurfing releasing its new “principles”).<sup>34</sup>

It is important to note that the relationship between the design of online space and human behavior remains an ongoing empirical question: it remains a possibility that coordinating highly motivated people in an idealistic pursuit has some inherently unstable elements. In that case, the managerial implication might be that inviting users to participate in organizational planning needs to be framed as an inherently risky undertaking (or a chaotic opportunity, depending on one’s frame of reference). Whether this is or is not the case will emerge from further research that takes organizational or offline dynamics into account.

Another implication is that scholars should maintain an awareness of the impact of their scholarship on the social actors they study, as well as the normative implications of their work. As Daniel Hoffer tried to persuade his scholarly audience, one interpretation of this case could be that governance only becomes truly important when it is contested, and the ultimate verdict on any particular policy is conflated with other factors that determine the influence, power, and market share held by a grieving constituency. This view is tied to evidence about user registration and reports of positive experience, but it is also tied to values about how people should treat each other in organizations. In this case, Kasper Souren lists Yochai Benkler’s *The Wealth of Networks* and Karl Fogel’s *Producing Open Source Software* on his BeWelcome profile as some of his favorite and most influential books; he also recalls passing through a Berkman Center event before traveling to Montreal to join the CouchSurfing collective. As a participant in these communities he

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<sup>34</sup> Some (including Kasper) within the hospitality exchange volunteer community have considered this approach, but have lamented their limited access to data. See *Trust Decreasing Among CouchSurfers*, <http://www.opencouchsurfing.org/2008/04/23/trust-decreasing-among-couchsurfers/> (accessed on 8/31/09).

actively sought authority for certain views that he derived from a combination of his personal experience and study. Researchers should acknowledge the entanglement of social theoretical scholarship with practice and remain as vigilant about their own impact on these communities as they are about other factors.

Given this dynamic, the hospitality exchange case invites us to examine our analytical boundaries and find ways to welcome in ideas seeking shelter and community, recognizing them out of a conviction that the experience ultimately leaves both of us better off.