

An analysis of the development of home exchange organisations

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This paper contributes to a better understanding of the home exchange phenomenon by considering the historical development of the home exchange intermediation processes, membership profiles and the role of the media. The Internet has enabled a more interactive process and facilitated home exchange kernels which, by the way they are organised, allow a degree of self-organisation. Processes of specialisation and differentiation change the home exchange intermediation landscape.

Keywords: home exchange kernels, hospitality networks, tourism intermediation

Een analyse van de ontwikkeling van home exchange organisaties

Dit onderzoek draagt bij aan een beter begrip van het fenomeen woningruil, hierbij is gelet op de historische ontwikkeling van de woningruil, bemiddelingsprocessen, lidmaatschap profielen en de rol van media. Het internet heeft voor een interactiever proces gezorgd en vergemakkelijkt woningruil kernels die, door de manier waarop ze georganiseerd zijn, een zekere mate van zelf-organisatie toestaan. Processen van specialisatie en differentiatie veranderen het 'Woningruil bemiddelings landschap'.

Trefwoorden: gastvrijheid netwerken, toerisme bemiddeling, woningruil kernels

房屋交换组织的发展分析

本文从房屋交换中介历史的发展过程中让读者更好地了解房屋交换的现象，成员间的利益和媒体的角色。当今的互联网已经促进了更多的互动交流，并通过由互联网组织及一个自助的方式协助房屋的核心交换过程。因此过程的专业化，多样化以及一体化改变着房屋交换中介的革局。

关键词：房屋交换的核心，旅游中介，酒店网络

Introduction

This article is part of a larger study which assesses the nature of the experiences in more or less self-organising hospitality spaces. The study questions the strictly defined roles of 'hosts' and 'guests' as well as the rational planning strategies within contemporary commercial hospitality settings. By assessing both host and guest experiences, within the context of non-commercial forms of networked hospitality, the author adds to the discussion on how to (re)vitalise hospitality in commercial settings. This discussion is partly informed by Ritzer's (2000) concept of 'McDonaldization'. According to Ritzer (2000), a constant drive to increase efficiency leads to predictable experiences. This process is defined as McDonaldization. This article looks at the development of

home exchanges as a non-commercial form of networked hospitality. Non-commercial hospitality network forms theoretically have the potential to enhance the process of De-McDonaldization (Ritzer & Stillman, 2001). The question is how these processes evolve within a host-guest relationship.

The study of the home exchange phenomenon is interesting since home exchanges are a growing hospitality practice worldwide and candidates often report valuable, transformative, unique experiences. Despite the out-of-the-ordinary experiences, it is almost neglected by the academic world. The entire study into the home exchange experience embodies a predominantly qualitative approach with a focus on play theory and assemblage theory. A hospitality standpoint which focuses on

the significant means of exploring and understanding society (Lashley et al., 2007) will be applied. However, this article will describe the phenomenon from a quantitative angle and focuses on the organisation of the home exchange phenomenon, member profiles and media attention.

Literature review

Although the home exchanges phenomenon started in the 1950s, academically it has hardly been covered. This is probably because it is a more hidden process which uses existing facilities for accommodation and is, therefore, a rather unrecognised phenomenon. The author conducted an extensive search in academic databases to find previous instances of research into home exchanges. The databases used were: Omnifile, Cambridge Scientific Abstracts, International Bibliography of Social Sciences, and Geobase. The search terms used were: 'home exchange' and 'home swap' and the international equivalents such as 'huisuitwisselingen' and 'intercambio de casa'. The search yielded 126 different instances of popular articles in newspapers and magazines. The articles included the experiences of the candidates and usually a description of the home exchange process and the financial advantages. Remarkably, some academics in the selected journals often put an advertisement for their own intended home exchange. The author found only one instance of academic interest through a search outside the academic databases.

In 2006, two Master's students, Arente and Kiiski (2006), wrote about home exchanges in their dissertation entitled: 'Tourist identity expression through postmodern consumption: a focus on the home-exchange phenomenon'. Arente and Kiiski (2006) examined the home exchange phenomenon using the concepts of motivation, lifestyle and identity from a tourism perspective. In-depth interviews with home exchange participants provided the empirical data for their research. Their findings indicate that the home exchange phenomenon, to some extent, could be understood as an expression of liberation from the traditional tourist image, and as such home exchange plays a role in constructing the identity of post-modern travellers.

The following definition of home exchanges is made by the author, considering there is no generally accepted definition:

Home exchanges are a series of transactions whereby participants negotiate hospitality and (temporarily) inhabit each other's homes. The nature of the decentralised transaction includes both tangible and intangible aspects, the relationship between participants is non-commercial and the host is not physically present during the stay.

Locating the home exchange as a form of hospitality in a home setting

The author would like to call attention to the nature of the home exchange by focusing on related hospitality practices within a home setting. Other forms of hospitality in the home setting display many similar traits. Home exchange can be distinguished by its special combination of the themes of the presence of the host and non-commercial intentions. As starting point, hospitality in a home setting will be described.

Hospitality in a home setting is different to the hospitality

offered in a hotel setting. Douglas (1991) distinguishes between the private home spaces and hotel space. A hotel is designed for efficiency, calculable activity, and justification in commercial goals. Whereas he describes the private home as hospitality space as the opposite of a commercial organisation with limited privacy and based on a gift economy (Douglas, 1991). Douglas (1991: 290) describes a home as 'the reflection of ideas' and as having aesthetic and moral dimensions (Douglas, 1991: 289).

Lynch (2005) describes a continuum with the hotel on one side and the private home on the other; in the middle he places the commercial home. Home exchanges are usually conducted in the private home of the host. Although the host is absent, the home still reflects the everyday life routines of the host and there is limited separation of the guests from the host. In other words, the space is not objectified or commodified.

Home exchanges can be seen as a non-commercial form of hospitality within the home setting distinct from the self-catered hospitality types. Self-catering refers to the guest staying in a home setting whereby the host is absent. Another form of commercial hospitality within a home setting is the commercial home, although the host is present. The commercial home is where 'paid for' accommodation is provided in a property that also functions as a private home. It embraces a range of accommodation types including some (small) hotels, bed and breakfasts (B&Bs), and host family accommodation which simultaneously span private, commercial and social settings (Lynch, 2005). The concept is also described by several other authors such as Clifford (1997) and Urry (2000).

Commercial intentions in a hospitality setting are described by Lashley and Morrison (2000: 32) as the commercial hospitality paradox. This paradox is based on the notion of the social dynamics of hospitality: the philanthropic exchange and mutuality between hosts and guest. As soon as the hospitality becomes a trade exchange, it becomes an instance of a controlled negotiation between customer and a host. The reciprocity in the hospitality transaction disappears as the commercial hosts also employ controlling techniques such as yield management and security.

Concerning the self-organising nature, self-organisation can be defined as the lacking of a central planned agency. The self-organising form is controlled by laws which are directives defined by the non-commercial hospitality network organisation, but executed and negotiated by the members themselves.

Home exchanges can be seen as 'Do It Yourself (DIY) hospitality networks'. For clarity, the author will retain the concept of non-commercial hospitality networks. These networks are more or less self-organising, specifically with regards to the role of the members in the creation of the hospitality 'product'. The development of the Internet provided the structure for intermediate organisations to develop advanced intermediation opportunities, and enabled potential massive growth. The most relevant aspects of non-commercial network hospitality are its non-commercial nature, the home setting, and the fact that the details of the hospitality are negotiated rather than given. Two different types of non-commercial hospitality networks can be distinguished: the home exchange where the host is predominantly absent and the hospitality stay where the host is present. Although limited academic material can be found on

home exchanges, academic coverage of the non-commercial hospitality networks has been conducted.

In home exchanges, the home is disembodied by the host. In this respect, we can compare the concept with self-catering facilities in home settings. This disembodied home, in which the host is not physically present, changes the nature of the host-guest transactions. This situation empowers the guest to flee from the control of the host. During the stay, members use each other's amenities based on reciprocity. When the host is absent, it has consequences for the degree and form of self-organisation of the host-guest transaction: the home can become a playground and artefacts may become toys in the hands of the guest. In some instances, the host-guest relationship will even reverse. Self-organisation has the potential to escape the performative scripts and roles described by Goffman (1959) who uses the metaphor of performance to analyse hospitality transactions. Urry (1990: 7) writes that home-exchange provides modern tourists with the extraordinary opportunity to avoid the solicitude of tourism's 'surrogate parents', i.e. travel agents, carriers, and hotel managers. The self-organising nature can be seen as a form of consumer emancipation (Kozinets, 2002). Kozinets (2002) writes that consumer emancipation can be considered as a constantly evolving process of confrontation: 'to enthrone the disorderly, chaotic, anarchic, creative, risk-taking, and innovative forces of human nature against its orderly, planned, pre-programmed, boring and imitative aspects'.

The organisation of the non-commercial hospitality network is provided by so-called intermediate bodies. These bodies are usually based on a main belief of how members should participate within the network. A good example of an intermediate body with a strong viewpoint on how members should interact during hospitality stays is the organisation 'CouchSurfing', which grew from seven to 520 094 members in just nine years (their own figures, retrieved June 2008). The CouchSurfing organisation states on their website (www.couchsurfing.org) that the organisation wants to 'change not only the way we travel, but how we relate to the world!' These claims of non-commercial hospitality networks are rather far reaching and ask for a critique. Critique can be informed by Hand and Sandywell (2002: 197) who question the technological fetishism surrounding the Internet: 'The fetishism of the internet involves fusions of political values and ideals with new techniques of information production and dissemination, creating both increasingly fragmented, pluralised, aleatory futures, and novel forms of citizenship, democratic internationalism and planetary governance'.

This technological fetishism can easily relate to the claims of non-commercial hospitality networks, such as the CouchSurfing organisation, which assign themselves transformational powers. Hand and Sandywell (2002: 197) conclude that these form of organisations combine Anglo-American models of democratic reform and governance with laudatory accounts of the libertarian possibilities of the new communication technologies and will irresistibly expand to embrace communities and societies hitherto 'undemocratised'. Molz (2007: 65) conducted research into informal hospitality networks, such as CouchSurfing and Global Freeloaders, and forms of non-commercial hospitality networks and found

a cosmopolitan desire for and openness to difference by the participants. However, she is very critical of hospitality networks for allowing absolute hospitality, as defined by Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2002), who advocate unconditional hospitality. Home exchanges can also be critiqued on the same criteria of access since they function on the basis of reciprocity: participants need homes in order to participate.

Methodology

The starting point for this study was the wish to gain more insight into the area of home exchanges from an organisational perspective. The results are based on interviews with country representatives from home exchange organisations, an exhaustive and analytical search on the Internet, observance of an annual meeting of country representatives from a home exchange organisation, and firsthand experience of home exchange through membership in the Homelink organisation. The interviews were conducted with three country representatives of large international home exchange organisations in 2008. These interviews were semi-structured and covered the following themes: historical perspective, technological advancements, membership profiles and marketing, home exchange economics, including value, home exchange experiences and future directions. The interviews were documented and the analysis was discussed with the interviewees. The interviews were processed in Nvivo and the following themes can be recognised: the richness of the home exchange experience, the lifestyle of the members, and home exchanges in non-popular areas. The live interviews were conducted with country representative for Homelink International and Intervac. These two organisations were selected since they are the oldest home exchange organisations in existence, and both have a large worldwide representation. Homelink was founded in 1953 and has 13 500 members and Intervac was founded in 1953 and has 8 000 members.

In addition, from 2006 onwards, a representative for Home Base Holidays in the UK has occasionally been contacted by e-mail. Home Base Holidays was founded in 1985 and has 1 750 members. The country representative was selected since she is involved in the process of creating a home exchange community whereas other organisations restrain from creating a community. Due to the fact that all home exchange organisations have a web presence and are highly dependent on the Internet, it quickly became apparent that a very widespread and powerful estimate of the characteristics of the home exchange organisations could be made through an exhaustive and analytical search of the Internet.

During this search, the following topics were analysed: the code of conduct for participants (the laws of hospitality), the founding year, number of participants, parts of the kernel, and the management of insecurity. Home exchange organisations usually allow guests access to their database (although the contact details of the members are only visible to members). This approach has the advantage of being up-to-date and driven by the home exchange candidates. The third source of data was observation and participation at the annual meeting of a large home exchange organisation. This was, in the light of actor network methodology, to follow the actors within a network. According to Murdoch (1997: 224) we should simply follow the networks wherever they may lead: 'the role of the

analyst is to follow the actor-networks as they stretch through space and time, localizing and globalizing along the way'. During the meeting, the author was given the opportunity to present findings from the embodied part of the research into the home exchange experience. The fourth source of information is the author's private membership of the exchange organisation Homelink International. By these means, the author conducted eight home exchanges, which provided, in addition to experimental data, insight into the negotiational aspects of home exchange. The following topics are covered in this article: a historical perspective and the development of the intermediation process, the intermediation process and value, socio-economic aspects, and the media.

A historical perspective and the development of the intermediation process

Prior to the development of the Internet, the home exchange organisations relied on catalogues. The members' details and requirements were collected by country representatives who were responsible for printing and distributing the catalogues. Two traditional home exchange organisations, Intervac and Homelink International, both started home exchanging in its current form in the 1950s. Intervac was started by teaching unions in Europe, as they began to work together and to cooperate for the improvement of conditions and, more especially, to improve understanding between people from different cultures and backgrounds. They could benefit from their extended holidays if they could find a more economical way of travelling to other countries. Both organisations work on a national level and provide a travel insurance system. Country representatives appoint an international board from among the other country representatives. This board organises a meeting every year with all country representatives. The power however is at a national level, resulting in a rather decentralised structure with control mechanisms at a country level to control growth and trust.

An interesting fact is that home exchange intermediation was once employed by the multinational company, IKEA, as marketing tool. At the end of the 1980s IKEA provided a home exchange service in partnership with Homelink International. This service was provided in the seven countries where IKEA was active, and available for so-called 'IKEA family' members. Customers could fill out a form in IKEA stores, which were then processed at the head office in Sweden and printed in a separate catalogue. The idea was that customers could participate in home exchanges within the setting of the IKEA family membership network, and those members got the opportunity to live in a global home. However, after only two years, this network became part of the Homelink International directory. According to Homelink International, the reason for the discontinuation of this service was that the administration in Sweden could not handle all the different forms and addresses.

The development of the Internet enabled a more efficient form of home exchange intermediation – an increasingly centralised organisation, with more peer-oriented control mechanisms and search facilities. The figures in Table 1 show the growth in the number of home exchange organisations. This clearly shows a relatively large growth beginning between 2000 and 2006 (more than 50 per cent). This development can be explained by the advantages provided by a database

system and online possibilities.

During the beginning of the twenty-first century, online systems, which Leadbeater (1999) describes as 'kernels', were initiated. Kernels are central digital systems which allow members to market and negotiate transactions. The provider facilitates transactions and interactions through a kernel between members and thus provides a platform for self-organisation. This self-organisation aspect was always a feature of the home exchange phenomenon, but the kernel allowed home exchanges to be organised at a faster rate. People can instantly change the availability of the home and can interactively search for suitable exchanges. Moreover, the kernels provide communication opportunities between the members. Several home exchange organisations, such as Intervac and Digsville, offer facilities which include extensive narrative approach, with lifestyle, family characteristics and photographs. Kernels also facilitate rating systems whereby the candidates rate each other's experiences with the other candidates and all home exchange candidates can see these ratings. Other kernels which facilitate self-organisation are, for example, CouchSurfing, Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn. These kernels focus on community building and enhance community building between the members. The use of kernels lowered the threshold for entry as a facilitator of a non-commercial hospitality network. For the home exchange market, this is clearly the case since no expensive production and distribution processes are needed (e.g. provision of catalogues). The non-commercial nature is not based on the fact that the facilitating body does not make a profit, but rather that the members do not place a monetary value on their hospitality transactions. The facilitating body can have a commercial intention, such as collecting membership fees and sponsorship money.

The author aims to distinguish four types of home exchange organisations. Firstly, the traditional home exchange organisation with country representatives that formerly predominantly depended on catalogues and, still in small numbers, print catalogues (Intervac). These organisations have relatively the largest databases which allow members extensive choice. Secondly, the kernel, as described by Leadbeater (1999), allowed for the development of the second type of home exchange intermediary service without country representatives. The country representatives were historically needed to gather and publish data about the home exchange participants. This new organisation is centrally led and hosted and members can, regardless of their physical representation, participate in negotiating home exchanges. A third type of home exchange organisations do not offer a home exchange service exclusively, but offer a home exchange services as part of their wider offering. This wider offering usually caters to special interest groups such as homosexuals, dog lovers or horse lovers. A fourth type of home exchange organisation are the bulletin boards without memberships, such as Craigslist, where visitors leave messages for one another to promote a transaction concerning cars, bicycles, jobs, relationships and also home exchanges. The fourth type of home exchange intermediary is not included in the summary tables since they do not form a unifying entity nor do they include codes of conduct concerning home exchanges. In addition, these systems lack security.

On one hand, home exchange organisations are diversifying their offerings; on the other hand they are specialising their

Table 1: The number of start-up home exchange organisations in combination with the total number of home exchange organisations

	Pre-1983	1983–1993	1994–1999	2000–2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
The number of start-up home exchange organisations	2	6	8	14	5	18	5	1
Cumulative number of home exchange organisations	2	8	16	30	35	53	58	59

offering. Organisations diversify their offerings by offering a wide range of services, such as second house rentals, home rentals, babysitting, au pair services, hitchhiking services and hotel bookings. Such development shows that the organisations can use the membership database for many service-related transactions. Some inter-meeting body organisations specialise their offerings by targeting only special niche markets. A country representative indicated that these specialised services make home exchanges for certain groups easier and more secure because people then know what to expect. As an example, she indicated that members of the Dutch Reformed Protestant Church like to exchange within their own group. This ensures that they will not be confronted with potentially controversial books (such as *The Kama Sutra*) on the bookshelves of their hosts' homes. Indeed, within the Netherlands this group have their own organisation called the 'Interkerkelijke Uitwisselingsorganisatie'. Further research into this organisation indicated that the matching of the members and their homes is executed by the organisation based on the member's preferences and lifestyles. Table 2 summarises the number of home exchange organisations catering to particular interest groups.

The intermediation process and value

The set up of each home exchange intermediating kernel is basically the same, i.e. a large database system with membership, extended author and search facilities. Apart from this technological database driven kernel, home exchange organisations explain their procedures, laws of conduct and home exchange experiences. The candidate fills out a form on the web about the characteristics of their home, lifestyle, job, car availability, family life and travel preferences. Then, through a search machine, visitors to the site can fill in their travel needs, including where they would like to visit. Moreover, the kernel offers 24-hour hotlists for accelerated intermediation.

The home exchange organisation creates a virtual market space, in which (vacation) times in homes are traded with other (vacation) times. A high value in the market of home exchanges is created through popularity and a high value enables the home owners to be more selective in defining their own travel wishes. The popularity of a home is dependent on the region, the leisure possibilities of the home as well as the available timeslots. According to the home exchange representatives, cities are very popular as well as the more traditional vacation destinations such as Italy, Spain, and France. Candidates in more popular regions (e.g. Florence) receive many requests (sometimes five a day) which they have to reject. Moreover, festivals and events increase the value. On the home exchange sites, it is rather easy to determine the popularity of homes and regions, since home exchange

Table 2: The number of home exchange organisations with specialisation

Home exchange organisations with specialisation	Number
Luxury	5
Gay and lesbian	2
Religious	3
Academic	3
Disabled	2
Eco-tourism	1
Seniors	1
Realtors	1
Country specific	3

candidates are able to indicate their preferences and other candidates can search for these. Country representatives warn home exchange candidates in less popular areas that it might take a while before they can take their first exchange.

The country representative from Homelink International mentioned that Homelink is alert to the need for controlled growth of the database. When the number of candidates residing in less popular regions becomes too large, it will be difficult to find home exchanges for them in the more popular regions. In the mid-1990s the number of members in Great Britain became too large for Homelink, and resulted in a price increase. Strangely enough, this price increase led to more home exchange candidates. By looking at the numbers of participant in different countries, it appears that home exchanges are still a marginal phenomenon. Home exchanges are a typically Western phenomenon with members from predominately Europe, USA and Canada, and Australia and New Zealand.

Socio-economic aspects

Based on the answers given by the home exchange representatives, the motivation for becoming a member falls into three categories: the opportunity to become immersed in local culture and society, to save money, and in response to members' annoyance at being classified as a 'tourist'. The socio-economic characteristics of typical successful members are, according to a country representative, people in their 50s to 60s, with no dependent children, or people in their mid-30s to 40s, usually with dependent children. They are middle class, educated professionals, self-employed or retired, with a higher-than-average income. They are independent travellers who are open to exploring new cultures and meeting local people (hence the appeal of home exchange). Furthermore, they are generous, open minded, trusting, and fairly house-proud. The other two representatives recognised a similar profile. They both refer to

the most represented professions, namely teachers, journalists, architects and doctors. All country representatives also indicated the increasing diversification of the candidates.

The country representative indicated three downsides to participating in a home exchange, namely the willingness to provide the private property, the possible risks, and the amount of work involved in preparing and executing the exchange. A possible risk is that the home exchange can be cancelled by one of the parties. In addition, since the self-organising nature allows candidates to subjectively interpret their own house through their online description, there is a risk that the guest may experience a less appealing lifestyle or home location than expected from reading the listing. Concerning the amount of work, the candidates have to communicate intensively with fellow home exchange candidates before the actual exchange. Before and during the exchange, candidates have to clean their house, provide food, and prepare an itinerary. After the exchange, candidates have to restore the host's home to its original condition, which can be very stressful.

The media

For the media, home exchanges are a popular subject in many newspaper articles, magazine articles and other news items. These articles usually include an interview with a candidate about the home exchange experience. The home exchange organisations receive many requests for these articles and consider them to be a good marketing tool. The media usually include practical information such as the advantages, costs and procedures of home exchanging and web addresses. The media also frequently report about the experience of having a stranger in the house. Two recurring themes are that home exchanges are a great way to meet the locals and, as a home exchange candidate, you will be engaged in the life of the host. Overall, the representation of home exchanges by the media is very positive, though perhaps this is to be expected since journalists represent a large section of home exchange databases. The following quotation is representative of how journalists inadvertently promote home exchanges: 'The home-exchange concept sounds kinda, well, hot' (The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, 2007). Two popular movies have been made about home exchanges, namely *The Holiday* (2007) and *Tara Road* (2003). Both movies have the same theme. They show what can happen when a person starts living in another's home and sharing neighbours, friends and so on. In both movies, the reason for the exchange is to look for excitement and to flee from personal problems.

Conclusion

The development of the Internet changed the process of home exchange intermediation, from rather static catalogues to powerful interactive platforms. This presented the opportunity for a high number of commercially oriented home exchange organisations to start up (lured by the relatively easy access and the promise of possibly high returns on any investment). Once the kernel is established, it can result in a large membership base, as the CouchSurfing example shows. Moreover it enables easy start-up and possible large returns on investment. Current developments include processes of specialisation and diversification. Specialisation into the provision

for home exchanges for particular groups such as long-term exchanges, villa exchanges, exchanges for the handicapped, exchanges for homosexuals, exchanges for Jews, exchanges for students and teacher exchanges. Diversification processes are also visible among the home exchange organisations. The membership organisation can, in addition to the home exchanges, also offer taxi services, hospitality exchanges, vacation house rentals or other services such as babysitting.

A full analysis of the role of the media on the home exchange phenomenon still needs to be conducted, but a general scan indicates that the media contribute in a positive way to the marketing of home exchange vacations. Their particular strength is in stressing the uniqueness of the experience and in explanations of the mediation process.

The travel preferences of the candidates show that home exchanges follow general travel trends. Countries which are high in demand are the traditional vacation countries, such as France, Spain and Italy. Looking at the profile of a typical home exchange candidate, growth can be expected in this sector, since the baby boomers are ready for retirement and looking for meaningful experiences. A further integration of kernels could provide platforms which will allow for a further difference within the hospitality setting.

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