

## **Beyond Freedom and Oppression**

### **Social Media, Refusal, and the Politics of Participation**

**Zeena Feldman**  
City University London  
*United Kingdom*  
zinaida.feldman.1@city.ac.uk

#### **Abstract**

This paper explores the relationship between social media, writing, and resistance. Drawing on a 2-year ethnographic study of the niche social network site CouchSurfing.org, I examine the dynamics and mechanisms of resistance that emerged within the site following CouchSurfing's conversion from a non-profit to a for-profit structure. I focus specifically on three text-based tactics of resistance used by site members, and through the work of Patrick Hanafin and Maurice Blanchot, demonstrate how these tactics of refusal prompt a radical rethinking of "refusal" as such. Via the CouchSurfing case, I also argue that a proper appreciation of social media's political significance and the ideological stakes of "being" online requires attention to the conflictual relation between democracy, oppression, and capitalism. Finally, the paper reflects on the possibilities and limits of critique from within.

#### **Keywords**

resistance; refusal; CouchSurfing; social network sites.

This is a story about social media, writing, and resistance. Drawn from a 2-year ethnographic study of the social network site CouchSurfing.org, it is a story that flags up some of the most salient, unsettled, and frankly, unsettling questions about social media's political significance. These questions, I want to suggest, are alive precisely

because of the foundational **hybridity** or **impurity** of the internet. As Jodi Dean, Jon Anderson and Geert Lovink (2006, p. xviii) point out, the internet

was never completely public or private; it migrated among government, academic, and corporate sectors, not least because [the internet] was not a unitary technology but itself an agglomeration of several existing ones, each with its own body of technical experts and their cultures of work, accountability, and legitimacy. (2006, p. xviii).

It seems to me, then, that the task for researchers concerned with the broader politics of the internet is clear: to locate, map, and unpack—to the extent possible—those “cultures of work, accountability, and legitimacy” which inform the particular technologies and mediated social spaces under analysis. It is precisely by unearthing these competing and constitutive narratives, histories, and agendas that we can begin to get at the ideological stakes of “being” online.

Indeed, as Andrew Feenberg suggests, technology and ideology are two sides of the same coin. For him, “[v]alues are not the opposite of facts [...] (because a technical) environment [is] shaped by the values that presided over its creation. Technologies are the crystallized expressions of those values” (Feenberg, 2010, p. 12). Through examination of CouchSurfing and its regimes of communication and resistance, this paper attempts to think through how this twinning of technology and ideology shapes the politics of participation.

The paper proceeds in four parts. The first develops the notion of internet hybridity in the social media context. The second provides a brief history of CouchSurfing. The subsequent section details three text-based tactics of refusal used by discontented CouchSurfing members. Finally, I conclude with some thoughts about the limits of critique from within.

### **The Hybridity of Social Media**

By way of beginning, it is useful to flesh out a bit further how the notion of internet hybridity can be understood through the lens of social media. This

understanding informs the paper's overall discussion of the possibilities and limits of social media as technologies of resistance.

In both academic literature and the popular press, discussion of social media is often linked to the dual discourses of democratic empowerment and counter-hegemonic resistance. This narrative was popularized in large part by the so-called Twitter Revolution in 2009, when Iranians used the microblogging site to organize protests against the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Through Twitter and other participatory platforms, accounts of mass opposition and regime violence were broadcast around the world and social media became rhetorical shorthand for democracy, empowerment, and populist rebellion (see Kamalipour, 2010). A year later, we saw the same lines of argumentation accompany coverage of the "Arab Spring" revolutions—most notably in Tunisia, Bahrain, and Egypt—where Twitter and Facebook were habitually represented as technologies of liberation (e.g. Sabadello, 2012).

Against this optimistic strand, more critical scholarship attended to the repressive uses of social media in these same struggles (e.g. Morozov, 2009). That work pointed to the complicity of internet technologies in campaigns of government surveillance, intimidation, and far worse. Meanwhile, as Facebook made its \$100 billion stock market debut, social media platforms became increasingly entangled in capitalist frames of reference.

So, are social media inherently democratic? Oppressive? Or are they merely concerned with the "logic" of accumulation? Put another way, can we most properly understand the politics of social media as emancipatory, repressive, or consumerist? Recalling the notion of internet hybridity, I want to explore via the CouchSurfing case how all three of these narratives **together** co-construct social media's political agency. Furthermore, I want to suggest that it is the conflictual relation between these three readings and how that relation is managed, negotiated, and contested that informs the political register of online participation.

## CouchSurfing: A Brief History<sup>1</sup>

CouchSurfing (CS) is a social network site for travelers. Launched in 2004 as a non-commercial platform for hospitality exchange, the site now has nearly 4.5 million users worldwide (“CouchSurfing Statistics”, 2012).<sup>2</sup> CS basically works like this: you sign up, create a profile, and then you can coordinate stays with other members in their homes and have people stay at yours. And this is all done for free. Members never pay to host or “surf.”

The CouchSurfing organization – through its website and communiqués to members – framed non-commercial hospitality exchange as a means of fostering intercultural understanding and tolerance. This was aimed ultimately, in their words, at “creating a better world one couch at a time” (Figure 1). Thus, CouchSurfing articulated itself as both a utopian set of values **and** a travel technology.

The other relevant background is that CouchSurfing was built and maintained primarily by its members, very few of whom were paid for their work. Alongside technical roles, volunteers were also responsible for answering member emails, translating the site into more than two dozen languages, investigating member disputes, and moderating nearly 40,000 online discussion forums.

Additionally, CS had a network of volunteers called Ambassadors, which consisted at its peak of approximately 2,000 people. As the title implies, CS Ambassadors were cheerleaders for the CouchSurfing project. They were tasked with organizing events in their local communities, welcoming new members, and fielding

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<sup>1</sup> The findings presented here are culled from a 2-year ethnography of CouchSurfing, which I have conducted as part of a larger research project. My findings are based, in part, on participant-observation in two online discussion forums on the CouchSurfing site, 48 in-depth member interviews, and content analysis of 300 member profiles and approximately 4,000 member testimonials. Where members are referred to by name, pseudonyms have been used. To further protect participant anonymity, I have also opted out of including full URLs to the online discussions quoted throughout the paper.

<sup>2</sup> CouchSurfing claimed to have almost 4.5 million users in statistics published on June 19, 2012 (“CouchSurfing Statistics,” 2012). However, this figure refers to the number of profiles registered on the site, not the number of unique users. Interviews I conducted with Jamie, a volunteer involved in CS site administration, confirmed that CouchSurfing’s published user count included duplicate and inactive profiles (J. Smith, personal communication, August 7 and 27, 2011). CS co-founder Casey Fenton, speaking publicly in Paris in October 2011, put the number of active users at 1 million.

queries from current and prospective members. Although not CS employees, Ambassadors were expected to conform to a 12-part Ambassador Code of Conduct, justified on the grounds that Ambassadors’

behavior as members, travellers, guests, hosts, and volunteers is a direct reflection on CouchSurfing [...] It is [their] responsibility to represent the community well.... [They] are the face, voice, eyes and ears of the community. This responsibility means that all Ambassadors will be held to the highest standards of personal and professional conduct. (“Ambassador Ethics Code,” 2011).



Figure 1: CouchSurfing homepage, April 19, 2011.

Beyond this, ordinary CS members – so not volunteers in any formal sense of the term – did the site’s main work of hospitality exchange; they were the ones welcoming strangers into their homes. Ordinary members also organized local events, they created wikis with resources for travelers and hosts, and they contributed to the site’s discussion forums. Thus, in one sense, CS can be approached as an example of communitarian self-management.

At the same time, the CS **organization** – although a registered non-profit – was raising a lot of money from its members. The available financial data suggests that between 2004 and August 2011, CS raised nearly \$6 million through direct donations, merchandise sales, and primarily, an address verification scheme. This is a significant sum, considering that the organization – with no fixed office and few paid staff – had very little overhead.

Given members' tremendous generosity over time, the organization's announcement in August 2011 that it had become a for-profit corporation, and had accepted \$7.6 million from two venture capital investors, came as a shock. Company leadership claimed that for various legal reasons they had no choice but to convert to a for-profit structure, but their justifications did not hold water for a core of committed and engaged members. Indeed, many of these members read the site's corporatization as outright theft of community-made, and therefore community-owned, resources. In response, these discontented members launched a text-based campaign of refusal.

### **Radical Politics of Refusal**

In this campaign, members used writing as an instrument to draw attention to and critique CouchSurfing's commercialization and the ethics thereof. In this section, I focus specifically on three textual practices by which CouchSurfers expressed their resistance: (1) watchdog disclosure; (2) profile reappropriation; and (3) reference warfare. Through these practices, CS members took up the "right to refusal," which Patrick Hanafin argues, "involves a questioning of why it is that the law presumes to be in control of language. It involves a certain refusal to submit to the law, to be insubordinate" (Hanafin, 2004, p. 14).

#### *Watchdog Disclosure*

Much of this insubordination took shape in, or at least inspiration from, two CS discussion forums, "Brainstorm Redefined" (BSR) and "We Are Against CS Becoming a For-Profit Corporation" (We Are Against). We Are Against went live 3 days after CouchSurfing's for-profit announcement. BSR was founded in 2007 and was originally

conceived as a platform for members concerned with the sustainability of the CS project and the usability of its website. But over time, and well before CouchSurfing's for-profit conversion, the focus of BSR shifted. Rather than a space for suggesting system upgrades, it assumed a watchdog function and became a mouthpiece for members demanding governance reform and increased transparency on the part of CS leadership. It became a space where members published information about donation mishandling, volunteer mistreatment, staff misbehavior, and various other improprieties. It was also the forum for posting CouchSurfing financial and legal documents, internal correspondence, and other operational details, some of which was leaked by anonymous whistleblowers who worked or volunteered for CS in an official capacity and some of which – for example, legal incorporation documents and revenue projections – was obtained and collated by concerned members with no official link to CS operations.

After the for-profit announcement, BSR members devoted significant resources to reconstructing the chronology of CS's corporatization. They contacted lawyers, accountants, and other hospitality exchange organizations, and posted their findings in the group. They also contacted government officials in the states of New Hampshire, where CS was originally registered (as a non-profit); Delaware, where the for-profit CS was incorporated; and California, home to CS's new office. And they communicated with B Lab, an organization that certified CS as a socially responsible corporation.

One explicit aim of this fact-gathering was to prove that CS leadership intended to commercialize the site long before it announced the for-profit conversion. A related aim was to demonstrate the persistent dishonesty of CS leadership. For some members, exposing this dishonesty seemed to be an end in itself. Watchdog disclosure was, in this sense, rebellion **through** transparency. Moreover, it was rebellion largely delinked from aspirations of radical transformation.<sup>3</sup> After all, making documents and accusations public was unlikely to make CS give back the venture capital money. And educating

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<sup>3</sup> There is a notable exception to this. For at least two participants, watchdog disclosure offered a pathway toward legal action. These participants defined their "tactics and strategy [were] always centered on the hope for concrete legal change in the situation" and viewed information sharing as a means by which to recruit more human resources (i.e. researcher-activists) in support of that effort (S. Adams, personal communication, July 6, 2012).

users about management indiscretions was no guarantee that people would stop using the site. Indeed, there were plenty of people in both BSR and We Are Against **defending** CS management and its right to profit from the website. According to one member “*Some people just react emotionally to words such as investors, but [...] [t]here is lots of good that can come of all these developments*”.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, even within seemingly reform-oriented spaces like We Are Against and BSR, there was actually no consensus on how to evaluate the ethics of the site’s commercialization.

Furthermore, if everyone who read the watchdog disclosures decided to stop using the site, CS would lose its internal voice of dissent. This hints at one of the paradoxes of critique from within, online. On the one hand, being members of CS enabled users to set up forums like BSR where they could take CS leadership to task. But on the other hand, for corporations like CS, online dialogue or “community participation” is profitable regardless of content. So long as users are producing data and spending time on the site, they are adding to company value.

One CouchSurfer posted that “*If we [do] not speak the truth, [the] system will get [even] worse!! [...] these guys betrayed me, because all the work was done by volunteers, who were working for free*”.<sup>5</sup>

But what is being overlooked there is that speaking on the site – whether it’s speaking truth **or** lies – speaking, or writing, is just another form of free labor. This means that even a group called “We Are Against CS Becoming a For-Profit Corporation” – for all its reformist ambitions – denotes the **impossibility** of free speech in the CS case.<sup>6</sup> This is to distinguish between two kinds of free speech. One is the

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<sup>4</sup> Posted on <http://www.couchsurfing.org> by Alex, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Posted on <http://www.couchsurfing.org> by Eliza, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Some CS participants were acutely aware of this paradox and they diverted part of their disclosure activities to independent, ad hoc structures—for instance, listservs and an autonomous website. This was done in part to continue information sharing without contributing to the CouchSurfing corporation’s data inventory. For members concerned with the possibility of legal action against CouchSurfing, this was also a means of protecting their discovery efforts and concealing information for strategic reasons (S. Adams, personal communication, July 6, 2012).

ability to say anything without fear of censorship. The other is a form of speech delinked from economic calculation. Thus, while CS has plenty of the first kind, the second form of expression has arguably been rendered impossible because “speech” on the for-profit site—no matter its content—automatically adds to company value.

### *Profile Reappropriation*

The second text-based tactic of refusal that I encountered is what I term “profile reappropriation.” Profile reappropriation is a practice whereby users made their CS profiles into unsanctioned spaces of protest and information sharing.<sup>7</sup>

For some members, this involved changing their main profile photo to include a banner that announced: Not for Sale, Sold, Sold Out, or some variation on this theme (Figure 2). Members of the We Are Against forum even set up an independent website called Pimp My C\$ Profile, which enabled visitors to add these banners to their photos (Figure 3).



Figure 2: “Not for sale” profile photos.

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<sup>7</sup> In earlier versions of this paper, I referred to this practice as “profile hijacking.” Two of my informers took issue with this choice of terminology, arguing that “hijacking” necessarily connotes the seizing of **someone else’s** property. As one informer put it, “I cannot hijack MY profile” (S. Adams, personal communication, July 6, 2012). While I am sympathetic to this argument, I find it necessary to problematize the assumption that online profiles are private property. This task, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

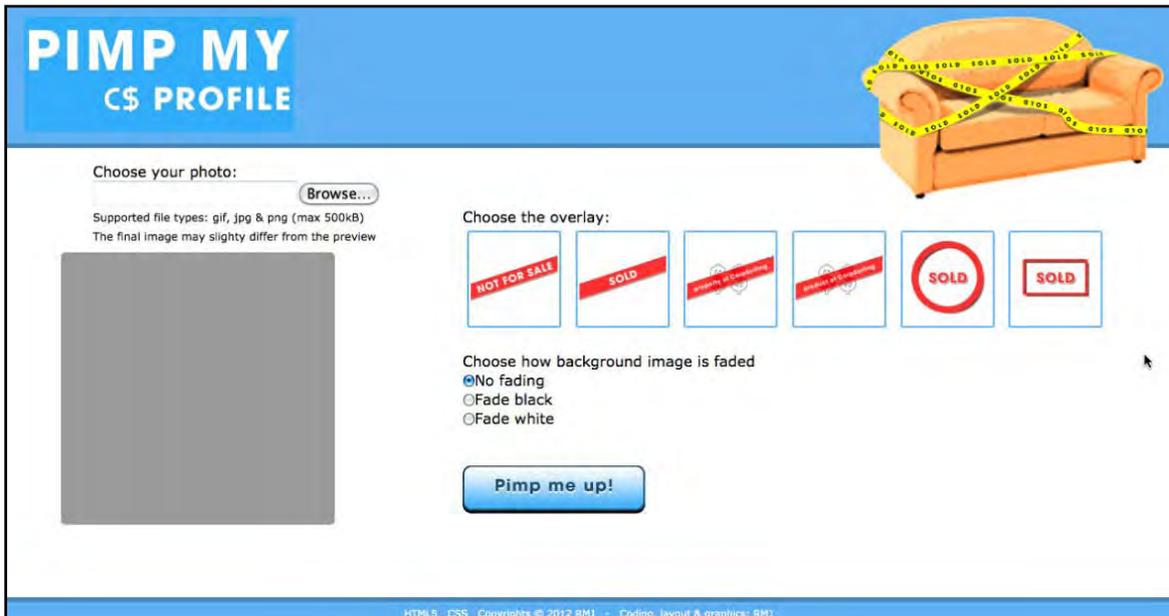


Figure 3: Pimp My C\$ Profile homepage, accessed June 19, 2012.

CouchSurfers also articulated their resistance in other spaces of the profile template, including sections where one can describe oneself, one's philosophy, one's couch, and share one's opinion of the CS project. Therein, some "rebels" stated that they would no longer be offering their couch through CS because of the corporatization. Many explained that they would continue hosting, but through BeWelcome, a non-profit hospitality exchange website that they praised for its transparency and democratic governance. These members typically used their CS profiles to link to BeWelcome and many included the BeWelcome logo on their CS page (Figure 4).

At the same time, some "rebels" decided that any information they put into the CS template would ultimately benefit the CS corporation (i.e. add to its data inventory), so they intentionally stripped their profiles of content. Meanwhile, others used their profiles simply to explain why they felt let down by CS leadership.

Members were also quite clever in increasing the visibility of their rebel profiles. In CS, users must publish their couch status – meaning, they must indicate whether they are able to host people in their home or not. Answering "yes" means that the profile appears in the search results of travelers looking for a host. So here, discontented

members figured out a way to use the CS system against itself – they turned their couch status to “yes” and thereby got exposure for their profiles and their grievances.

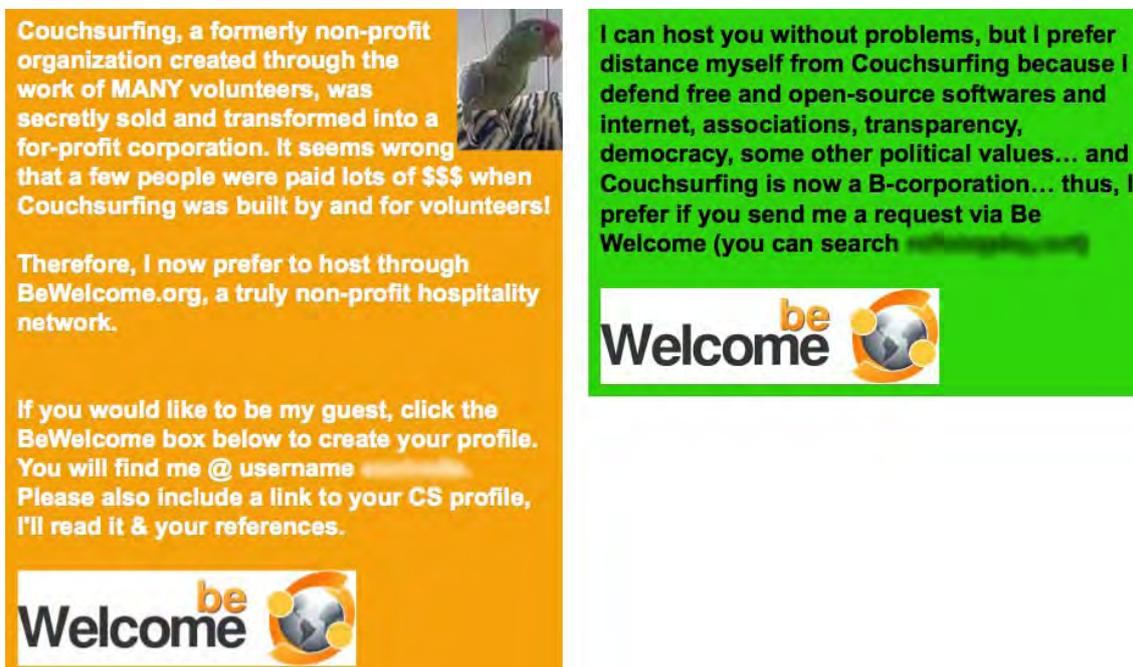


Figure 4: Examples of BeWelcome endorsement on CouchSurfers' profiles.

### *Reference Warfare*

“Reference warfare” is a third textual tactic of refusal I encountered in CouchSurfing. This refers to seizing CouchSurfing’s main security feature – the posting of references – and operationalizing it in the service of attacking CS power structures. On CouchSurfing, references work in much the same way that they do on eBay. In the CS case, this typically means that after you stay at someone’s house, you rate the encounter as positive, negative, or neutral and write a narrative about your experience. The rating and narrative then display on both members’ profiles. Members of We Are Against sought to take advantage of this function and launched a campaign that advocated posting negative references to the profile of Casey Fenton, CS’s figurehead and co-founder.

In the words of one member:

*It's time to fight for the Couch Surfing community we have worked so hard to build, and the best way to do so is by using the system against itself: we are now starting to post negative references on Casey Fenton's profile - and no matter how fast the website administration struggles to delete them, when they start coming by the hundreds ... they will have to just let go and let our voice be heard.... The corporate investors are watching Casey's profile right now: let them hear our voice and realize that CS will not be a good business investment for them - that CS is not just a website but a community of volunteers whose kindness and generosity is not for sale!*<sup>8</sup>

And indeed, many members did post negative references and reposted them in the discussion group as a form of testimony. But in the end, all of the negative references were deleted from Fenton's profile. Site administrators justified this on the grounds that the references violated two guidelines governing CS's reference system. Specifically, admins retained the right to remove references:

1. When the person leaving the reference has clearly never interacted with the other member at all, except by reading their profile;
2. When the reference is only related to a member's work for CouchSurfing.<sup>9</sup>

Yet members continued to post negative references, at least for a while. Some did this in an articulated hope that it would expose CS leadership's dishonesty to its new investors. Other members hoped that it might prompt CS to rethink its decision to go for-profit. But others were resigned to the change. One "We Are Against" member wrote that despite having left Fenton a negative reference:

*Basically I think it's too late to do anything, the contracts are signed, it's a done deal [...] It won't do much good, they have enough apathetic or*

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<sup>8</sup> Posted on <http://www.couchsurfing.org> by Carlos, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Posted on <http://www.couchsurfing.org> by Anne, 2011.

*indifferent users, and the new and unsuspecting ones that will come from now on, who will not feel betrayed at all since they come into the new state of affairs, but still, they should know what happened.*<sup>10</sup>

So despite accepting CS's commercialization, there was also a flicker of hope that the reference campaign would leave a *trace* of indignation, which might be picked up by those to come.

### *Radical Refusal*

Taken together, the text-based tactics of watchdog disclosure, profile reappropriation, and reference warfare represent a mode of what I call "radical refusal". This is a form of refusal that exceeds the simplicity of yes-no argumentation; it exceeds the ends-oriented logic of winning and losing. Maurice Blanchot (1986) writes about this sort of excess in relation to Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby the Scrivener," in which a clerk is assigned tasks by his superiors until one day he answers, "I would prefer not to." Hanafin (personal communication, January 25, 2012) has noted that at this point, Bartleby achieves power through negative affirmation. He is not saying, "No, I will not do what you ask." Rather, he is foreclosing or exceeding the schematic of yes-no argumentation. He is radically complicating what it might mean to refuse.

In CouchSurfing, a similar sort of refusal emerged. One particularly interesting gesture of this refusal came from a participant who wrote:

*With the recent selling out and big-shot investors they [CS] have joined the 1% [...] They have betrayed... their users and original statements and policy. All because of profit [...] I do not wish to comply to [what] they want [...] CS will never be able to check and verify that, they might as well hire CS police from the influx of big money [...] I cannot donate free things, time and advice anymore [...] I am honest about it...guests must bring everything they wish to use by themselves, from food to toiletpaper, drinks etc etc. No*

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<sup>10</sup> Posted on <http://www.couchsurfing.org> by Marie, 2011.

*free wifi anymore, or use of computer, telephone etc [...] I consider my profile a free advert for my home and time...I adjusted to the new CS. I am also going for profit now...<sup>11</sup>*

Here, this member is not refusing membership in CS. He is instead reconfiguring his practice in a way that underscores the company's new capitalist rationale **and** this member's participation in it. By laying claim to the space in-between transgression and complicity, he too is radically complicating what it means to refuse.

### **Conclusion**

Writing in the CS case contributed to a project of rebellion, and this project was collaborative and democratic (insofar as participation was open to any CS member) and articulated emancipatory aims. At the same time, the project was rife with conflict and disagreement. Forum members didn't all want the same thing or share the same opinion; and their online arguments very clearly captured the competing narratives that constitute the Web's hybrid social texture. There was plenty of oppression *and* democratic practice *and* support for capitalism. And most importantly, there was no consensus between these narratives. This evokes Mouffe and Laclau's work on radical democracy, in which consensus is not only beside the point, but actually incompatible with the democratic ideal. Mouffe specifically argues that "acknowledging the ineradicability of the conflictual dimension of social life, far from undermining the democratic project, is the necessary condition for grasping the challenge to which democratic politics is confronted" (2005, p. 4).

To close: The CS case points to the paradoxes of a campaign of refusal launched through the very structure whose legitimacy is under attack. Here, writing enacted through participatory technologies offered the promise of emancipation but because it operated through the discourse and architecture of capitalism, writing simultaneously posed a challenge to the rebel's "right to refuse the way in which... language

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<sup>11</sup> Posted on <http://www.couchsurfing.org> by Adam, 2011.

taxonomizes [him or her as] subject' (Hanafin, 2004, p. 4). This is not to suggest that the market's claims on social media trump those of emancipation or oppression. Instead, it signals an opportunity to think further about how social media's competing discourses co-constitute the politics of participation. It also offers an occasion to reflect on the limits of critique from within. In the end, the CouchSurfers' resistance—although it inspired passion and awareness— did not change the direction of the CS organization. But that does not mean it was pointless or inconsequential. Instead, their campaign of radical refusal can be thought in Hanafin's terms as an "interruption, which neither destroys nor recreates but leaves the present not quite as it was" (Hanafin, 2004, p. 12).

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