

“Just like home.” The Words of online hospitality

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Abstract: In 2015, the Singa association created Calm (Comme à la maison “Just like home”), an internet platform for connecting refugees who are looking for housing with private individuals. The analysis of its archives and different versions provides information on both the expressions of online hospitality and the role of digital tools in facilitating hosting and accommodation. While this innovative interactive directory is based on state-of-the-art tools, it also challenges their limitations, namely the algorithmic temptation that its implementation may reflect, meaning the attempt to automate what is contained within the fluctuating realm of human relations.

Keywords: refugee crisis, online hospitality, techno-solutionism.

Summer 2015. At that time, just like today with the war in Ukraine, the media in every country as well as social media were full of reports on suffering refugees on the borders of Europe¹. Years ago, we saw images of Syrians, and today there are ones of Ukrainians charging their smartphones on the road to exile or using Facebook, WhatsApp, and Google Maps on their journey, which have circled the world and led to an unprecedented collective awareness of the importance of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the lives of migrants. Since then, a type of technophilia has swept the world of migrants². Making digital technology a lever for integrating these vulnerable populations has become the number one challenge of many initiatives carried out by associations, companies in the social and solidarity economy, universities, public institutions, technology giants, or simply by anonymous individuals committed to the humanitarian cause.

Seen as a wide range of opportunities—in conjunction with the diversification of online uses and access to a stable, personal, and free connection—technological innovation intended to help refugees is occurring alongside the increasing dematerialization of public services for immigrants³ while also going hand in hand with social innovation. On one

¹ This chapter is a translated and revised version of the article originally published here in French: « Comme à la maison ». Les mots de l'hospitalité en ligne. *Hommes & migrations*, 1337, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4000/hommesmigrations.13962>

² We have identified around one hundred applications intended for refugees, see Table 1.

³ For example, the ANEF portal:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20240427021017/https://administration-etrangers-en-france.interieur.gouv.fr/particuliers/#/> and also the excellent platform: <https://web.archive.org/web/20240502093303/https://refugies.info/fr>

hand, it has its origins in the collaborative practices of hackers, but also in the resurgence of the ideal of community within entrepreneurial capitalism linked to digital technology and the online reappraisal of emotion.

In her remarkable book *Le sens de l'hospitalité* (The Meaning of Hospitality), Anne Gotman (2001, 300) shows that the war in Kosovo has already shown television viewers crowds of defeated faces and sparked an unprecedented surge of personal solidarity at the end of the 1990s. This “immediate,” “human,” “natural,” and “self-evident” response is an emotional effect caused, yesterday as today, by the news, the effectiveness of images on TV, and the effect of social media. This has led to an unprecedented level of mobilization of “affective computing”⁴ (Chavalarias 2022).

Addressing the needs of refugees with a geek approach, donating their digital skills to serve their cause, proposing coding (not just help, support, clothing, accommodation, or food) to help migrants are all emerging forms of solidarity that we examine in this article.

Should Data4Goods, FabLabs, Techfugees, and other refugee hackathons be understood as new ways of connecting with others or are they building/configuring a new way of organizing hospitality and donation? How effective is it? Is it a form of technological utopia or social logic? A utilitarian approach or a humanitarian action? Or is it a technology company trying to take hold of the shock of the migration crisis, as researcher Evgeny Morozov (2014) describes when he talks about “technological solutionism”⁵?

In this article, we will look at the case of the Calm ‘Just like home’ platform⁶ now renamed ‘J’accueille’ or ‘I welcome’⁷. It proposes connecting “refugees seeking temporary accommodation with citizens who have a room to host them”, i.e. an immersion, lasting 3 to 12 months, set up and monitored by Singa, the association behind the Calm platform and which runs the back-office software. This involves analyzing a new form of personal hospitality, between private individuals, mediated by a digital system, and supplemented, or even corrected, by a human mediation protocol (employees and volunteers at the Singa association) that integrates a training program and face-to-face meetings between refugees and French people wishing to host refugees at their homes.

4 “Affective computing” is generally used either to manipulate the emotions of users in individual feedback loops or to lead them through methodological individualism to crowdsourcing practices by coordinating the action of digital crowds.

5 Technological solutionism consists of imposing so-called ‘intelligent’ industrial systems on populations in order to solve social and political problems. These industrial mechanisms are automated and often employed to benefit a data economy.

6 <https://web.archive.org/web/20180209063317/http://calm.singa.fr/>

7 <https://web.archive.org/web/20240502093417/https://www.jaccueille.fr/>

1. Research and methodology

We conducted our research in two stages. First, we carried out a detailed study between 2015 and 2017 of the content and operation of the Calm platform. We have created a collection of 11,892 host forms who have registered online for the program. This large, valuable collection provides information about the age or geographical location of the participants as well as the space offered at the host's home, including their 'motivations', and also contains an initial self-introduction (the 'Tell us about yourself' field). Then, we conducted a new series of interviews in 2022 to understand the association's development since its launch. We were able to explore the Singa association's digital archive again over the entire 2015–2022 period.

Our hybrid methodology is at the intersection of sociology and IT. We used a computational system for extracting, cleaning, and analyzing the Calm pool of information. Our results and reflections presented in this article are based on various ad hoc visualizations from the questions that emerged from the exploration of this data.

Our analysis is supported and enhanced by a series of interviews (conducted to orient the questions of the quantitative study beforehand and to validate its findings through feedback from the field) with hosted refugees, families that have housed them, and members of the Singa association.

2. Refugee hospitality: The algorithmic temptation

Since 2015, the Singa association has offered to connect French families who want to host a person who has submitted an asylum application through its Calm program, now called J'accueille!. The hospitality proposed by Singa is not trying to respond to an emergency situation but to register hosts over the long term to facilitate the integration of refugees (with the average hosting duration being 8 months) through an immersion process. Singa is not the only association to have combined digital technology with refugee hosting.

Today, almost all refugee associations—as well as state institutions in charge of foreigners—have “platformed” (Casilli and Posada 2019, 293–30), meaning organized all procedures via a platform.

Among these first initiatives are those undertaken by members of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) who use an email contact and registration system for host families. In Belgium, members of the Bxlrefugees citizens platform have organized their efforts in an autonomous and decentralized way through Facebook surveys. They then meet every evening in Maximilien Park in Brussels to set up particularly efficient, emergency accommodation for refugees on a daily basis.

The Singa association connects hosted refugees with private individual

hosts by having them fill out an online form. Between 2015 and 2017, registering on the platform was done in the following manner: when logging in, you first needed to indicate whether you are registering as a potential host or as someone in need of accommodation, and the system then directed you to a dedicated form. Both the hosts and those seeking accommodation registered individually, even if, in the case of the hosts, it was more generally understood to refer to as a single household (a family, a couple, or even a single person). These forms are based on the free Google Forms technology and are presented as a series of questions calling for open (free-form) or closed (multiple choice or listed) answers.

In its design, Calm's original intention was to build a kind of refugee-specific Airbnb, meaning to match a person who would like to host a foreigner with refugees looking for housing without using any other intermediary. In fact, the form for those seeking housing (refugees) was actually never set up, except for a few days at the beginning of fall 2015. During this period of time, the service was inundated with several hundred entries and broke down soon after. The members of the various associations who were assisting the refugees in the field completed the form on Calm for them. Thus, because the platform could not manage the demand, the form became inaccessible almost immediately, and the Calm team then proposed that those seeking housing should go to the association offices so they could meet them directly.

As for the host form, hosts could still access it and was regularly updated by the association. We count—through the platform archive—4 successive versions of this form: 1) before June 2015 2) from June 2015 to November 2016 3) from November 2016 to June 2017 4) after June 2017. Outside the archive, the platform continued to evolve after 2017 (in particular, its name changed) up to the present version: <https://www.jaccueille.fr/>. First, we can see that the Calm form is structured to provide continuity. New questions do not appear per se, but open questions generally tend to fragment and become more specialized ('tell us about yourself', 'type of room', etc.), leading into a set of narrower fields ('What languages do you speak?', 'How many rooms can you provide?').

Throughout the changes to the form, the descriptors with which the hosts are qualified in the database are transformed and streamlined. From an IT point of view, it is thus easier to manage a clearly defined and quantifiable parameter (age, number of rooms, list of languages) on a large scale than a field for free expression from which potentially poorly formulated or even unusable information has to be extracted.

What we observed later was in fact, a change in engineering implemented to improve the management and use of the registration data. Therefore, this discretization of an individual into a set of standardized

descriptors is based on a form of “algorithmic governmentality” as defined by Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berne (2013, 163–196). In view of this, we asked ourselves the following question: why did the Singa association want to streamline the way in which it manages its registration data to this extent? Why model the profiles of host families in this way?

3. Developing digital ways of hosting

Born out of the *Réfugiés Connectés (Connected Refugees) hackathon*, the Calm program was initially managed by people who do not consider themselves IT developers. By choosing an accessible and simple technological infrastructure (Google Forms and Excel spreadsheets), which serves as the basis for manually linking hosting/hosted pairs, the association first promoted human, mediation, and qualitative work based on the experience acquired by its team. Members of the association manually searched their database for good hosting candidates. Each mediation was the subject of a unique discussion between families and refugees.

However, a few months later when facing an increase in registrations, Singa decided to hire a developer for Calm. In interviews with the developer, we learned that he was then working on the design of an “automated matching” system for the hosts and those seeking housing that could support, or even replace, the tedious work of the members of the association. By encouraging precise and useful questions in the forms, he thought that he would identify “around thirty parameters” that acutely describe the profile of the hosts. The database would, in fact, be adapted for future algorithmic processing.

His automated suggestion system would then propose “a qualified subset of host families” who, once validated by the person seeking housing, would be able to communicate “in a private online lounge, hosted on the platform”. In doing so, the developer pushed the logic of automating the connection to the maximum, with mediation becoming purely algorithmic and supposedly neutral or fair because it was invisible and had no human intermediary.

But the developer and the association ended their collaboration because they could not reconcile their respective visions of the tool, and the system’s launch was canceled. Indeed, Singa quickly understood that the connection between refugees and host families needed to remain human, not become

⁸ “This is a certain type of (a) normative or (a) policy-based rationality based on the collection, aggregation, and automated analysis of mass data in order to model, anticipate, and preempt possible behaviors.” Algorithmic governmentality is a strategy for streamlining and transcribing reality into digital data that can be used by IT systems. The uncertainty generated by human behavior is removed (in this case, the free expression fields) in favor of spontaneous, objective information, which no longer needs to be assessed. (Rouvroy and Berns 2013, 163–196).

automatic (via an algorithm). It realized that, in order to succeed in its refugee immersion project, putting people in contact with one another and matching them via a platform, like Airbnb, would not be enough.

“Hospitality cannot and must not be delegated to a machine.” Singa realized that the core of its expertise (logistics, communication, diverse support, civic engagement, and collaboration with different government actors in charge of asylum procedures) was ultimately the best solution for finding accommodation for refugees and working towards their integration.

This experience led the Calm team to move towards a strategy that favors long-term accommodation (minimum 3 months), not the search for shelter in an emergency situation, and towards the set-up and multiplication of local teams throughout France. Today, Singa still provides online registration for hosts, but this is only a preliminary step. An offline protocol is now taking over from online registration in order to favor human selection or matching. Singa then provides training for the hosts and organizes meetings between those hosting and those who will be hosted.

After being tempted and experimenting with different algorithms and collaborations with developers, Singa is now refocusing on its know-how: giving logistical and organizational value to digital technology and letting volunteers do the rest. Their hospitality expertise has taken the lead as a vector of trust and connections between the two parties and is proving particularly effective in managing the Ukraine crisis, seven years after Calm was founded.

4. The words of online hospitality

Once filtered⁹ and anonymized, the Calm archives were explored through different dimensions (geographical, socio-demographic, etc.) and the changes in the vocabulary used by the hosts in the ‘motivations’ and ‘tell us about you’ fields were analyzed in greater depth.

In the following, we visualize the main dynamics of the question of hosting formulated by the actors themselves, from 2015 to 2022, between responses to emergency situations and a more thought-out desire to integrate a refugee. This observation first goes through a detailed exploration of the Calm archives from June 2015 to June 2017, and then we step back for an overview so we can examine the development of the entire semantic landscape extracted from the Calm archives until February 2022.

Between June 2015 and June 2017, Singa facilitated the hosting of nearly 300 refugees while registering 11,892 host registrations on its platform. The time distribution of these registrations is far from uniform, with almost

⁹ Here we merge some fields adjacent to the successive versions of the form and remove exact names and addresses.

10,000 hosting proposals in September 2015 alone.

In August 2015, the Calm program had not been officially launched yet and the platform was only known to associations and activists. Nevertheless, the number of guest registrations exploded on September 3, 2015, rising from a few dozen to several thousand within a week. The worldwide coverage of the photograph of the young boy Alan Kurdi, found drowned on the Turkish coast, sparked a huge emotional response and generated an unprecedented wave of inscriptions.

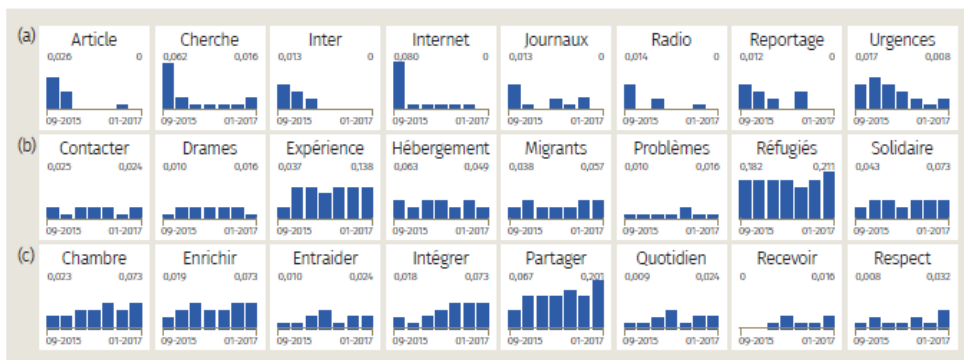
The quantitative analysis of the closed fields (age, place of residence, housing characteristics, etc.) in the form allows us to characterize these new hosts. They live in large French urban homes and offer simple rooms in small apartments or even just the living room with a sofa. Those who live in the countryside sometimes provide refugees with entire houses or vacant outbuildings that can accommodate much more than one refugee at a time. The hosts are young people in their thirties or parents who find themselves alone after their children have left home and some 50% of them are executives, retirees, or people with an intellectual profession (teachers, journalists, artists, etc.).

5. Media impact

The media coverage of Singa, in particular by France Inter, played a key role in the success of the Calm program. Between September 3 and 15, 2015, Singa was mentioned several times on the national radio, with a report, an interview, and a debate. In the ‘motivations’ field, the hosts then mentioned France Inter as the main vector of discovery for the association. The expression ‘I heard about it on France Inter’ becomes the common denominator of more than 500 registered via the online form. Listening to France Inter thus acted as a sociological marker at least as important as the age or profession of the hosts.

While hosting refugees for some families is a continuation of an already existing philosophical or political commitment (1968 protest participants, humanitarians, etc.) or even ties into a past family history (for descendants of immigrants), it seems that a majority of them said that they responded, first and foremost, to an emergency situation. For the first period of time, reports on the situation in the Aegean Sea broadcast daily on television and radio were pushing a non-activist segment of the population to look for, by their own means, a quick and concrete solution to the crisis.

Figure 1. Evolution of the frequency of use of words from the ‘Motivations?’ field.



This impression, which was reflected in the qualitative observation of the ‘Motivations?’ field, could be confirmed by an overall semantic analysis. To do this, we built a new collection based on all the statements of the hosts’ motivations. We then browsed through these texts using automated ‘scripts’ and natural language processing tools to extract a vocabulary representative of the words most commonly used by the families. For each of these words, we drew a quarterly frequency curve normalized by the number of new registered users over the same period. This allowed us to track the evolution, over time, of the frequency of use of all the selected words (Figure 1).

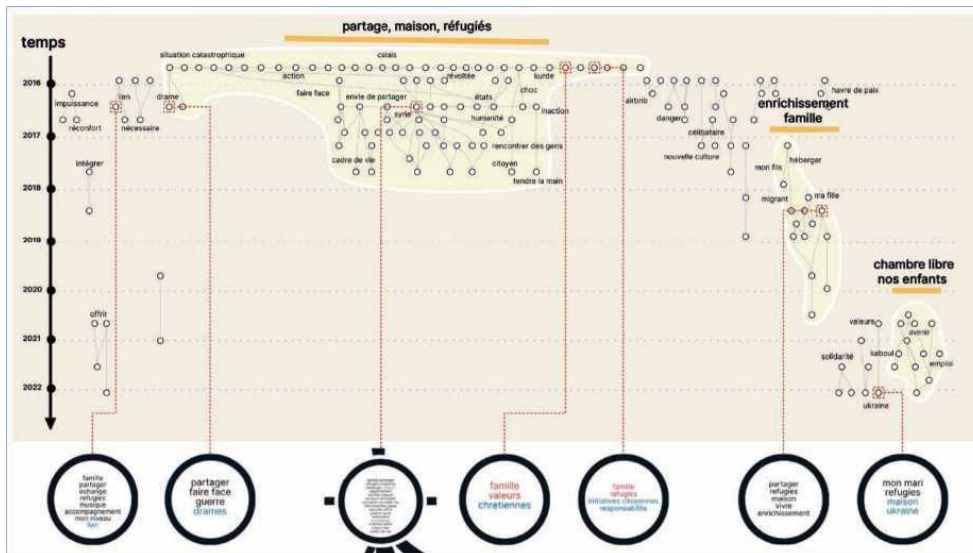
6. From Calm to J'accueille: Vocabulary development

These words can be classified into four categories: 1) words frequently used at the end of summer 2015 and whose proportion decreased afterwards (Figure 1, a), 2) words used in a stable manner from June 2015 to June 2017 (Figure 1, b), 3) words that became more important as the media coverage of the crisis decreased (Figure 1, c), and 4) words used in a non-characteristic manner. In fact, a vocabulary specific to each category can be identified: if the desire to remain in solidarity with the crisis and distress of refugees by offering them accommodation remained stable over time, it was first in response to the media shock (television, radio, reports) that made many hosts join the Calm program, as well as a response to the urgency of the situation. On the other hand, the more chronologically we move away from the epicenter of the crisis, the more well thought-out and developed the hosting experience becomes over time: the hosts say they want to integrate the refugees, host them comfortably and respectfully, help each other, and have a richer, more meaningful experience. The vocabulary becomes calmer, reassuring (‘warmth’, ‘happy’, ‘beautiful’, ‘heart’), and is used as ways to express care and hospitality. Thus, the room shared in 2017 became more prominent than the living room sofa offered in 2015.

Has there been another emergency comparable to the summer of 2015?

To answer this question, we expanded our analysis and visualized on a macro scale the evolution of more than 600 words used in the field of ‘Motivations?’ from the Calm database (which has since become J'accueille) up to February 2022. To do this, we used a computational approach called phylomemy reconstruction. With the help of textual data search algorithms, we identified recurring and common patterns for the thousands of responses recorded in the form. These motifs or themes can be seen as groups of words frequently used together by different people in the ‘Motivations?’ field. They are represented in Figure 2 by circles. It was then possible to trace the evolution of these themes over time by linking them from one month to another using a semantic similarity measure. The structure thus obtained is called a phylomemy (Lobbé, Delanoë, and Chavalarias 2022) (Figure 2). It consists of a series of branches representing a coherent lineage of themes that respond to each other and change over the months.

Figure 2: Evolving semantic landscape (i.e. phylomemy of the entire Calm platform archive between 2015 and 2022



Valérie Mustapha Djamel, screenshot, 2022. © Chantal Capelli/TelecomParis.

First, the phylomemy confirms the importance of the 2015 crisis, marked by a record number of registrations on the platform and by a “semantic outpouring”: it was between 2015 and 2017 that the majority of welcoming words were invented. Beyond 2017, few new words enter into the phylomemy, except on the margin as historical milestones of migration events (‘Kabul’, ‘Ukraine’, etc.), which apparently did not have as much influence (in terms of the content of the database).

The main branch ‘sharing, home, refugees’ is characterized by the emergence of two major themes: on the one hand, the vocabulary of urgency, which is not included in the rest of the phylomemy, and on the other hand, the vocabulary of accommodation and sharing, which continues until February 2022. Starting in 2017, the hosting vocabulary stabilized around the concepts of encounters and enriching experiences. A central place is then given to children from host families (‘my daughter’, ‘our son’, etc.) either as a moral trigger (‘What will my children say if I do nothing?’), or as a fully-fledged driver for hospitality: by interacting with the people hosted, the child will encounter a new culture.

This analysis via phylomenies is only a first step towards a more complete search of the archives, but at this stage of our study, we can already note an interesting advance for human and social sciences in general, while remaining in the field of digital humanities and migration. In his 2015 article "The social sciences and the traces of big data", Dominique Boullier¹⁰ rightly wrote that digital traces only allow us to capture the “high-frequency vibrations” of our societies and not long-term social structures, nor even medium-frequency movements of opinion. This was absolutely true: overwhelmed by an unprecedented flow of digital traces, SHS researchers, supported by computational methods, focused primarily on detecting events, peaks, and variations of great amplitude in the present. We now believe that we can overcome this limitation thanks to the new methods introduced by complexity science (such as phylomemy reconstruction) and the methodical constitution of thematic archives by SHS researchers such as the Calm collection on which we have worked. It is now possible to study shifts in opinion over time, while changing the scale between high vibrations (emergency moments) and low frequencies (semantic invariants).

Conclusion

Exploring the millennium-old research field of hospitality, which has given rise to such extensive literature, with our methods from the digital humanities is not without risk. While recognizing the limitations of such research, we want to emphasize that—from a perspective that goes beyond this case study—refugees’ access to digital technology has changed hospitality practices in an unprecedented way, starting with the ‘place’ that is given to a foreigner and that this foreigner occupies inside the home. Today, hosting a connected refugee means bringing home a whole connected environment and its communication practices with its family

¹⁰ URL: <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01141120/document>

network, geographically distant but constantly nearby on a daily basis via ICT.

Thanks to these digital technologies, their presence is ubiquitous. How to host and help someone integrate who is present more or less completely (physically and remotely) in several locations? And to add to the complexity, what is this house that is called 'Just like home' when the hosts, via ICT, are themselves travelers on their own remote communications platform?

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