
We Are Not There, Yet...

Refugee Informatics: Tools For Research

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Abstract

Refugee and Forced Migration Studies has a well-developed, interdisciplinary history. HCI related fields are newly entering this research area. Interrogating institutional power and systemic privilege can move our research communities towards solidarity with disadvantaged people across communities of practice rather than furthering disenfranchisement.

Author Keywords

refugee; forced migration; conflict; crisis informatics; refugee informatics; cross-cultural computing

ACM Classification Keywords

- Human-centered computing~Computer supported cooperative work
- *Human-centered computing~Ethnographic studies*

Introduction

My area of research and practice focuses on supporting the information and technology needs of persons displaced by conflict throughout the multiple phases of displacement, e.g. pre-flight, during- and post-flight, and diaspora populations. My goals are to advance theoretical understandings of cross-cultural communication in computer-mediated contexts, as well

as contribute to the development of practical, actionable solutions with displaced peoples and service providers. Currently, as part of my dissertation fieldwork, I am conducting research into the communication and technology practices of refugees being resettled by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in King County, WA. This study focuses on the relationships between life transitions experienced by refugees and their use of social computing systems. I employ open-ended data gathering practices including interviews, observation, and cultural probe kits. I strive to conduct ethically principled work which centers the needs of participants, stressing their concerns and reflecting an understanding of development as a process rather than an end. I have been a practitioner in refugee related work for over 20 years and currently work as an educator at the IRC in the Job Readiness Training program.

Refugee Informatics

Prior to the 1980's refugee research was conducted primarily by historians, legal scholars, and anthropologists (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). By the mid-1980's refugee and forced migration studies developed into a separate field. However, perhaps not surprisingly, research is still largely driven by issues of public policy, legal implementation, and structural practicalities associated with large population movements (Black 2001; Chimni 2009; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014, Shami 1996). Regardless of the cause of displacement refugee and diaspora communities tend to share certain attributes including, a sense of difference and awareness of marginal status within a host society; a desire to maintain links with the homeland and to resist complete assimilation; and a constant negotiation between identities and cultures

(Sinclair and Cunningham 2000). Dispersed peoples have a, "fragile centre of gravity," (Hanafi 2005) and communication technologies have played a crucial role for maintaining relationships and identity.

Between 1951 and 1980 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) put the global population of forcibly displaced people at 10 million (Betts 2011). In 2016 the UNHCR reported 10.3 million people were newly displaced in that year alone, which brought the total number of forcibly displaced individuals to over 65 million. Today we are experiencing the highest numbers of displaced people since data gathering began and yet in the field of HCI the needs of populations experiencing forced displacement is still a very nascent area of research (Brown 2016). As part of a literature review I discovered that a search in the ACM Full-Text Collection refined by year; 1947 - 2016; and field; where any = "refugees"; returned 42 entries out of a total of 483,622 records. The entries included journal articles, conference papers, and poster abstracts of which only 33 were found to be unique and topical.

Not yet...

We are not just spectators, we are co-creators of this space. ICTD, ICT4D, HCI4D, ... are acronyms which carry political and social weight. They represent dominant knowledge and power claims (Klein 2013, Melkote 2015). In this workshop I hope that we can examine theoretical perspectives, identify and critique interventions and practices that have emerged from them, and analyze their social, political, economic, and cultural consequences. But that we are going to give permission to each other that we are not there yet. I believe workshops like this provide opportunities for

participants to recognize how the intersecting identities we bring are triggered into action and how those choices affect our commitments to our communities and participants (Johnson 2006).

I am excited about the plan for this workshop, specifically the session format and activities described. In thinking about expanding on the notion of solidarity in my research area I brainstormed how I might engage in the sessions, these are some of my ideas:

Who is included? Forced migration is not defined by a single experience: refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, stateless people, IDP's... are different, but all vulnerable, populations.

Discussion: There is a lack of consistent, ethical messaging about how to engage with a population which for many state and international agencies is considered 'vulnerable', but not for US based IRB procedures. A postcolonial computing perspective (Philip et al. 2014) invites considering the place of power, misrepresentation, and context into research. Postcolonial computing also gives us operationalizable tactics for building better research designs, especially with populations traditionally viewed through a colonial lens.

Whose outcomes? Defining and measuring outcomes, or goals, from the perspective of different stakeholders.

Discussion: Cross-cultural practices have not been well negotiated in HCI research. Taking an intersectional approach challenges previous methods of using identity categories as discrete concepts with overwhelming explanatory powers (Schlesinger 2017). Ange-Marie Hancock expanded the earlier definitions of intersectionality to consider how the interactions of

race, gender, class, and other organizing structures of society impact access and equality (Hancock 2007). Intersectionalist analyses of displaced people, "...sheds new light on who goes and why, who will be denied the opportunity to move, who works and where, whose work is acknowledged as work, whose is invisible and unrecognized, how are gendered ways of life destabilized in the process of migration (Triandafyllidou 2015).

For how long? Forced displacement can encompass multiple lifespans but HCI research often does not embrace deeply embedded, long term efforts (Nardi 2016).

Discussion: The most commonly applied identifier for research involving refugees and technology is 'refugee information systems' which is strongly identified with a design focus. Examples include: chip systems to monitor refugee movements, debit card systems for food distribution, and computation registry programs for government agencies. These are often excellent solutions to short-term problems. Longer-term commitments signal greater trust, reliability, and solidarity with communities.

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