
“Rate Your Trafficker”

Speculating on Borders through Design

Katta Spiel

TU Wien (Vienna University of Technology)

Vienna, Austria

katta@igw.tuwien.ac.at

ABSTRACT

In Computer Science, including Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), there is the tendency to create and evaluate technologies upholding the status quo. Particularly in the context of borders, this means that technologies aim at confirming, affirming and strengthening them. They offer a playing field for the paradigmatic function of technological classification as driving force behind social and economic exclusion. I argue, that instead of implicitly supporting and aiding the constant violation of human rights that occurs on borders. Instead, we need to create disruptive designs that challenge existing power dynamics. I illustrate the potential of such designs by sketching out the concept of the 'Rate Your Trafficker' app, and how design could aid people in challenging borders by radically embracing the needs of people who want to cross them albeit aggressively being hindered to do so. As such, it also shows how we might design to be responsible towards the political act of designing technologies and to use the privilege we have in these position to foster basic human rights instead of further buying into systematic oppression.

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HCI AND THE BORDER

Recent guidelines for research with refugees suggest, among other aspects in research with refugees, to “contribute to the refugee agenda” [11]. Considering though, that most of the recent work is conducted either with refugee communities in western context [4, 13] or in temporary placements and camps [1, 6?], that refugee agenda within HCI remains somewhat constrained to those who are at least temporarily placed within certain contexts. Not the act of getting to these places (and crossing borders) is supported, but rather the agency after the act. At the same time, dominant research around borders in Computer Science (for example, [2, 5, 7, 10]) that keeps on reaffirming them, remains unchallenged¹.

¹And just on a side note, all of these texts do not even mention refugee identities as a valid point of agency, but rather discuss the need for border control on the basis of veiled threats and unspecified attackers. To some extent academia operates here within the same discourses as popular right wing rhetorics.

²Arguably, my own at the time of writing this contribution.

Curiously, this trend can be found within the host institution² of Communities & Technologies 2019 itself. Whereas in 2015 a feelgood initiative was started for refugees who are already in Austria [3], recent work within other strands of the university dehumanises refugees by conceptualising them as a resource to manage and seemingly uncritically engage with the notion of creating a central surveillance instance refugees’ movements [8]. The further ramifications of such a system, how it might eventually transfer towards further more or less marginalised populations and the ways in which refugee contexts create perfect test beds for control utopias [9] appear to be less reflected upon.

The aforementioned research and projects for (at least temporarily) placed refugees are necessary inquiries and initiatives that already challenged a status quo within the communities refugees land in. However, I argue, as a design and research community, we can go further from these works and not just support people who have arrived at a place (for however long), but also radically take on and amplify the perspective of those en route.

“RATE YOUR TRAFFICKER” – DESIGN REQUIREMENTS

Inspired by activism and art initiatives³ aiming at shifting the discourse around what it means to be a trafficker and who these people might be (i.e., commercial or activist), I will now delineate some initial requirements that might influence the design of a “Rate Your Trafficker” smartphone application. When talking about crossing borders, designers enter uncomfortable territory: this is a space in which overcrowded boats and trucks (and the deaths resulting from them) dominate news. Refugees have to justifiably fear being left in dangerous and precarious spaces with little information available to them [12]. There is a pressing need to support parameters establishing safety for refugees and legitimate trust in traffickers in this space. To this effect, I now present three design considerations.

1) Refugees need to navigate an ever changing environment of routes which constantly change regarding safety, accessibility and throughput. Their actions influence a huge network and the situation for other refugees. They also might rely on commercial or activist traffickers for transit. However, it is difficult to assess which of these traffickers are safe to consult. Seeing as a smartphone

³For example, <https://www.muenchner-kammerspiele.de/2-internationale-schlepper-schleusertagung-2015>

is the most ubiquitous technology refugees might have with them [12], designing such a service as an app seems appropriate.

2) Traffickers can use the application to build up a reputation and illustrate their motives for aiding refugees. However, as such aid is predominantly criminalised, the app should be able to provide information somewhat anonymously. This provides a new security and trust challenge as people need to be safe from prosecution, but also identifiable to each other when working together. It could be imaginable to have references (i.e., previous collaborators) vouching and using an anonymous network of mutual trust before becoming identifiable to individuals.

3) On an interactional level, it becomes also interesting in how to design fleeting apps, those that should not leave a trace in being used (as to ensure the continued availability of safe traffickers). How would we ensure that data is made redundant after its use? How would a record of trust still be maintained regardless, while practising data scarcity?

These design considerations are by no means complete or, to some extent, even realistic or appropriate. However, through seriously speculating on an app supporting border crossing, different questions are asked and questions of safety and trust become relevant in contexts where the rhetoric seems focused on threats and keeping others out.

WHAT SHOULD WE DESIGN?

Designing for border crossings, hence, comes with different challenges than upholding a border or designing with temporarily placed refugees. While challenging the notion of nation-states, borders and Frontex in particular is a desirable larger goal, in the meanwhile, HCI research can contribute towards such a goal by starting to re-think border technologies. What I presented here is, deliberately, purely speculative and very likely entirely delusional to assume this to become an actual technological prototype. As a comparatively wealthy white person who has always lived in western contexts, I have no first-hand perspective in how it might be having to flee one’s home. While the account is informally informed by my activist work with refugees, it does not come from a place of lived experience. Further, given the tight constraints of the issues that emerged already in the cursory treatment of the idea above, a technological solution in this space might be entirely unreasonable. However, speculating about potential border crossing designs can pave the way for actual participatory research, design and development of such technologies that then actively disrupt dominant border discourses. Speculating on these technologies can also further challenge the notion of who the ‘stakeholders’ in ‘border security’ systems are and reflect on our responsibility as HCI researchers towards marginalised communities to create a strong counterpoint towards techno-futuristic surveillance and control utopias.

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