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## HCI and Refugees: Experiences and Reflections

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# HCI and Refugees: Experiences and Reflections

## Introduction

Throughout history, conflict and natural disasters have led to the forced displacement of people and communities both internally and across borders. Due to the current rise in conflicts, refugee issues have headlined political debates and social media as 65.6 million people have been forced away from their homes. The large movement of asylum seekers and refugees across continents has made it a crisis that spans both the 'developing' and the 'developed' worlds. Despite the long-standing history of innovation and technology within the humanitarian sector, the high penetration of smartphones among refugees [3], has led to a shift towards the utilization of digital technologies. The current refugee crisis and the generations of refugees that have only ever resided in camps, warrant researchers to take an active role in addressing refugee issues, to engage in political debates and to explore the roles and uses of digital technologies within this space.

Within the current political climate; the urgency of the recent refugee situation coupled with the marginalization of already existing refugee communities such as the Palestinian refugees entail a new and critical outlook of the role of digital technologies. This drove us as a group of Human Computer Interaction (HCI) researchers to collectively come together to explore our role as researchers and our research's contribution within this complex and politically charged context.

Work within refugee humanitarian contexts is emerging within the field of HCI. Several projects have been implemented such as: computer clubs as a means of cultural exchange, online educational platforms, co-design practices with refugee youth, exploration of technologies as facilitators to refugee access to healthcare [2]. These projects took place in both European and Middle Eastern settings. With the increase of such research efforts we saw the potential for mobilizing together as a group of researchers to learn from each other and to support each other in our work.

At ACM CHI 2016 conference we organized a Special Interest Group (SIG [2]) to start a discussion of our role as researchers and HCI's role as a research practice within the current (and possibly future) refugee crisis. Around 40 researchers from the CHI community came together and discussed prominent challenges faced by refugee communities and how HCI

research and expertise could be re-appropriated and channeled to address these challenges. The challenges that emerged from the discussion were: access to refugee communities, access to services tailored for refugees including healthcare and education, integration of refugees into host communities and lastly refugee journeying to safety. There was a large discussion around ethical issues that need to be considered when engaging with refugee communities and the implications of working in this field on researcher safety and well-being. The group at the SIG agreed that we should collectively engage more frequently regarding our work and share experiences and ethical challenges we come across in our work. Additionally, there was a common interest expressed around supporting HCI researchers by creating collaborative research networks involving researchers from various contexts in which refugees are resettling.

In response to the SIG we ran a workshop titled "Refugees & HCI" at the Communities and Technologies 2017 conference in France. The workshop was initially meant to be held in the U.S. at CHI 2017 however in light of the travel ban that was introduced in the U.S., we came to the realization that many of the researchers working in this field are either refugees themselves or from countries where researchers have reported struggling at U.S. airports or facing difficulties in securing visas. Therefore, the workshop was moved to the Communities and Technologies 2017 conference [1].

The objective of the workshop was to provide a space in which researchers can exchange experiences and highlight opportunities to leverage each other's work and research. Through a series of activities encompassing brainstorming, critiquing and reflecting, participants shared their values and advice as researchers working in this field and collectively formulated guidelines for HCI researchers working with refugees. We present summaries of our discussions including examples from participants' experiences and guidelines for HCI researchers working in this field.

## Messiness in identifying scope

Working with refugees is messy due to the complex and varied needs of refugees that make it difficult to prioritise which areas we should be working in. The main areas that were found to be priorities included integration, health, basic education, higher education and livelihoods. While the workshop participants worked in separate groups on the areas of education, resilience, and resettlement they highlighted the intersections across these strands. Even within specific research strands such as education, complexities that influence the scope of the research were attributed to the division between formal and informal

learning and the debate of what skills are the most helpful for refugees. Other participants identified that the scope of the work in this field can be divided into technologies designed for administrative efficiency, such as tracking of services and identification of refugees, and technologies aimed to be used by refugee communities to address their needs (i.e., integration, connecting to local actors and volunteers).

Workshop participants emphasized that our research and technological designs should stem from the expressed needs of the communities and then be supported by academic discourse rather than initially starting from academic discourse. With these complexities in defining the scope of our work in mind, workshop participants discussed research approaches that would best inform the process of defining and refining research projects. Following a participatory action research approach, including long-term engagements and embedded research with varying levels of participation was identified to be an appropriate approach which accounts for the various levels of commitment of community members and collaborators. Participants also highlighted that as HCI researchers, versed in co-design and participatory design methods, we are in a position to promote the voices of refugees as stakeholders in the design of technologies and solutions. Technological designs should reflect refugee needs, experiences, and values.

## Research and Technology Ownership

Participants explored questions regarding the ownership of research data and technological designs. Researchers discussed experiences from the field where refugees would prefer to hide their identity and not be publicly associated with the data for legal reasons. The preference to remain unidentified also makes it more difficult for community ownership of technological designs that utilize geo-locational data and/or personal data (e.g., technologies that aim to enhance access to education and healthcare services). However, others described instances where members of refugee communities insisted on taking ownership of their data and stories by wanting to be named in the data and wanting their pictures to be shown. Publicly taking ownership of the data has been expressed by refugees we have engaged with as means of self-advocacy. The ethical implications of data ownership was a prominent consideration raised by researchers who are using social media as a source of data for understanding refugee experiences and interactions.

Workshop participants also discussed whether given the variability in literacy levels and resources available to refugees that enables them to access information, co-analysis and co-writing of research may be too idealistic. However, there are opportunities for digital

technologies of HCI research to take the form of 'outputs' that the community can engage with, build on and utilize outside of the realm of research.

## The Humanitarian Imperative

Participants identified that there is a humanitarian imperative behind their work with refugees that is characterized by a sense of urgency and a multitude of intertwining needs of refugee communities. The humanitarian imperative often motivating our work makes defining our roles as researchers in this field difficult. Indeed, it was identified that we need to be critical of our role as researchers. While working with refugee communities, we all begin to question how our research is benefiting the refugee communities we are working with. While the Scandinavian model of Participatory Design has been critical of the benefit of HCI research for local communities, the humanitarian imperative associated with working in this field and the levels of austerity and trauma experienced by refugees require deeper reflection on participants' beneficence. In many instances, refugee communities view us as a resource. One researcher recounted a particular situation during which he was asked by a participant for computer equipment and another researcher also described the experience of being asked for a loan by one of the refugee participants. These experiences highlight instances where researchers are torn between the role of being a researcher, abiding research ethical guidelines, and being a humanitarian. The workshop's participants agreed that our research, methodologies, and technological designs should aim to provide refugees with direct benefits that respond to the issues being faced by refugees while being flexible enough to respond to the day to day needs expressed by them. This is especially true in cases where we as researchers work for prolonged periods of time with refugee communities and the engagement becomes part of the communities' social practices. Such flexibility also requires the strengthening of the institutional feedback loop between researchers conducting the fieldwork and ethical review boards.

## Navigating the Micro and Macro Politics in Play

Conducting research in this field also requires researchers to be aware of the micro and macro-politics in play. We all agreed that while working in this field, engaging with institutional and structural politics is unavoidable especially when negotiating access to the community and collaborating with governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations. The political rhetoric surrounding refugees entails that researchers reflect on their own political opinions and motivations for conducting this research while

considering the opinions of other stakeholders. Being aware of one's political inclinations regarding refugee issues is essential as it guides our research and also how we interact with collaborators that may have similar or differing political points of view. Participants described several instances where they refrained from expressing their political views in order not to clash with gatekeepers while others stated that they are activists first and then researchers. Understanding where collaborators stand regarding these issues both at an institutional level and at the personal level is important in navigating ourselves and our work in these contexts. Several researchers indicated that in some cases, they had to carefully consider how to frame their research in order for it not to infringe on the political beliefs of local actors (i.e., using terms such as refugee livelihoods instead of employment opportunities when discussing research projects with local politicians in contexts where there is tension between host communities and refugees regarding job availability).

## How We Evaluate Ourselves as Researchers

One of the key discussions held by workshop participants was on how we evaluate our research. The long-term nature of our work, the messiness in defining scope, and the unpredictable issues that arise while conducting research in refugee camps entail slower publication rates, technological failure and ultimately difficulty in obtaining metrics currently being used to evaluate researchers. However, participants identified that community impact, visibility and dissemination of our work amongst non-academic stakeholders through dialogue with local actors, policy makers and humanitarian agencies should all be viewed as achievements that should be sought despite them not conforming to traditional views of what academic achievements are.

## Researcher Health and Wellbeing

Throughout the workshop, several experiences were shared about the impact that working in this field has on researcher health and wellbeing. Experiences ranged from being exposed to communicable diseases, such as scabies, while working in refugee camps to emotional stress experienced when conducting research. Participants discussed how taking in the stories of trauma and loss shared by refugees was overwhelming and coping mechanisms of talking through and/or journaling their emotions was beneficial. Additionally, participants expressed the feelings of helplessness felt when they realize that the magnitude and multiplicity of the issues faced by refugee communities surpass the scope of research. Lastly, researcher health and wellbeing was discussed from the

perspective of researchers being exposed to hostility and dangerous situations that arise when travelling to refugee settlements and sometimes when negotiating with local political actors for access to refugee communities. Participants agreed that in order to address the pressing issue of researcher health and wellbeing sharing experiences, lessons learnt and researcher safety protocols are essential. Some of the safety protocols mentioned include frequently communicating with local institutional actors regarding when the researcher is visiting communities, having at least two people going to the field at a time and having frequently planned communications with other researchers in which the researcher's emotional wellbeing is discussed.

## Guidelines for HCI Researchers Working on Refugee Issues

1. *Continuously define and redefine your role and research scope.* It is important for HCI researchers to continuously redefine their role based on continuously reflecting on what we have to offer the community and how our interactions with refugee communities and stakeholders are influencing the community and vice versa.
2. *Contribute to the refugee agenda.* Working in this field entails working with multiple stakeholders therefore it is an opportunity to make our research more impactful by contributing to the refugee agenda at a local, national and international scale through dialogues with stakeholders.
3. *Be flexible.* HCI researchers should go into the field with an idea of what their research interests are however they should adopt an approach that allows them to be responsive to community needs and stakeholder objectives.
4. *Build trust.* It is essential to build trust with the communities that we work with, and this is facilitated by continuous reflection on our own values and interactions with the community and through being transparent with refugee communities regarding our work and our values. It is also important to account for time needed to build trust between researchers and refugee communities.
5. *Be transparent.* Our experiences all indicate towards the need to be explicitly transparent with refugee communities about the research and our capabilities as researchers in meeting some of their needs. A big part of doing that is by managing the expectations of refugee communities and the other stakeholders involved.

However, given the politically charged context it is important to be aware of other's political stances and act accordingly.

6. *Leverage each other's work.* The humanitarian imperative and the multiple diverse needs of refugee communities could be best met by collaborating with other researchers working on different issues faced by refugees.
7. *Reflect with peers.* The emotional well-being and the challenges that present themselves in this field require researchers to constantly reflect on the work being conducted with peers working in similar refugee contexts.

#### References:

- [1] Talhouk, R. et al. 2017. Refugees & HCI Workshop : The Role of HCI in Responding to the Refugee Crisis. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Communities and Technologies (C&T'18)* (2017), 312–314.
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- [3] UNHCR 2016. *Connecting Refugees*.