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HCI and Refugees: Experiences and Reflections

Insights

- HCI researchers are taking an active role in addressing refugee crises.
- Conducting HCI research in refugee crises can be extremely messy and highly politicized.
- HCI researchers should continuously reflect on their role and interactions with refugee communities and other stakeholders and how they are contributing to the refugee agenda .

Throughout history, conflict and natural disasters have led to the forced displacement of people and communities both within countries 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 so-called developing and developed worlds. In line with the longstanding history of innovation and technology within the humanitarian sector, the high penetration of smartphones among

refugees [1] has led to a shift toward the utilization of digital technologies in addressing refugee needs.

Within the current political climate, the urgency of the recent refugee situation coupled with the marginalization of already existing refugee communities, such as the Palestinians, requires a new and critical outlook on the role of digital technologies in this space. This drove us as a group of human-computer interaction (HCI) researchers to come together to explore our role and our contribution within this complex and politically charged context.

Work within refugee humanitarian



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contexts is emerging within the field of HCI. Several projects have already been implemented, including computer clubs as a means of cultural exchange, online educational platforms, co-design practices with refugee youth, and the 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 and support each other in our work.

At the 2016 CHI conference, we organized a Special Interest Group (SIG) [2]. 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. The key topics that emerged from the discussion were: access to refugee communities; access to services tailored for refugees, including healthcare and education; the integration of refugees into host communities; and refugee journeys to safety. There was a lengthy discussion around the ethical issues of 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 about our work, sharing experiences and ethical challenges. Additionally, there was widespread interest in supporting HCI professionals by creating collaborative networks with researchers from the 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 [3]. The workshop was initially meant to be held in the U.S. at CHI 2017; however, in light of the travel ban, we realized 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 in securing visas.

The objective was to provide a space to exchange experiences and highlight opportunities to leverage each other’s work and research. Through a series of brainstorming, critiquing, and reflecting activities, participants shared their values and advice, and collectively formulated guidelines for HCI researchers working with refugees. Here, 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 complex and varied needs that make prioritizing difficult. The main areas of need 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 about 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 the tracking of services and identification of refugees, and technologies for refugee communities to use (e.g., for integration and 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, participants discussed approaches that would best inform the process of defining and refining projects. Participatory action research, including long-term engagements and embedded research with varying levels of participation, was identified as a good approach that accounts for the various levels of commitment of

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.



community members and collaborators. Participants also highlighted that 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

Workshop participants explored questions regarding the ownership of research data and technological designs. They 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 in another way: by wanting to be named in the data and wanting their pictures to be shown, as a means of self-advocacy. The ethical implications of data ownership were a prominent consideration raised by researchers using social media as a source of data for understanding refugee experiences and interactions.

We also discussed whether, given the variability in literacy levels and resources available to refugees that enables them to access information, the 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 the realm of research. For example, one project set up computer clubs in refugee camps; the infrastructure is now being used by the community in myriad ways beyond the scope of the initial project. Participants in projects have also met, in the absence of the researchers, to work on their own projects, such as websites, or to continue their education through online courses. Other participants have undertaken the role of tutors, providing further social media training to others [4].

THE HUMANITARIAN IMPERATIVE

Some identified a humanitarian imperative behind this work, characterized by a sense of urgency and the multitude of intertwining needs. It can make defining our roles as researchers in this field difficult. Indeed, we need to be critical of our role as researchers. While working with refugee communities, we all begin to question how our research is (or is not) benefiting the communities in question. 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. In many instances, refugee communities view us as a resource. One researcher recounted a particular situation during which a participant asked him for computer equipment; another researcher described the experience of a refugee participant asking him for a loan. These experiences highlight instances where researchers are torn between

the role of being a researcher, abiding by research ethics guidelines, and being a humanitarian. The workshop participants agreed that our research, methodologies, and technological designs should aim to provide refugees with direct benefits that respond to the issues they face while being flexible enough to respond to their daily needs. This is especially true in cases where we 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 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 demands that researchers reflect on their own political opinions and motivations for conducting this research while considering the opinions of other stakeholders. Being aware of our political inclinations regarding refugee issues is essential, as it guides our research and also how we interact with collaborators who may have different points of view. Participants described instances where they refrained from expressing their views



in order not to clash with gatekeepers, while others stated that they are activists first and researchers second. Understanding where collaborators stand regarding these issues at both an institutional level and a 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 (e.g., 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 the metrics currently being used to evaluate researchers. However, participants identified that

community impact, visibility, and the dissemination of our work among non-academic stakeholders through dialogue with local actors, policymakers, and humanitarian agencies should all be viewed as achievements to be sought, despite their not conforming to traditional views of academic achievements.

RESEARCHER HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Throughout the workshop, we discussed the impact of this field on researcher health and well-being. Experiences ranged from emotional stress to exposure to communicable diseases such as scabies. Participants discussed how taking in the stories of trauma and loss shared by refugees was overwhelming, and how coping mechanisms such as talking through and/or journaling their feelings was beneficial. Additionally, participants expressed the sense of helplessness that comes of realizing that the magnitude and multiplicity of the issues faced by refugee communities surpasses the scope of research. Lastly, we discussed the hostility and dangerous situations that can arise when traveling to refugee settlements, sometimes when negotiating with local political actors to gain access. Participants

agreed that in order to address the pressing issue of researcher health and well-being, sharing experiences, lessons learned, and researcher safety protocols is essential. Some of the safety protocols mentioned include frequently communicating with local institutional actors about when the researcher is visiting communities, having at least two people go to the field at a time, and having frequently planned communications with other researchers in which they discuss their emotional well-being.

GUIDELINES FOR HCI RESEARCHERS WORKING ON REFUGEE ISSUES

Based on the collective experiences of the workshop participants, the following are guidelines for the HCI community on conducting research with refugee communities. The guidelines aim to improve our interactions with these communities and guide our research toward contributing to the greater good of refugees.

- *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.

- *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.

- *Be flexible.* HCI researchers should

Being aware of our political inclinations regarding refugee issues is essential, as it guides our research and also how we interact with collaborators who may have different points of view.



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.

- *Build trust.* It is essential to build trust with the communities that we work with; this is facilitated by continuous reflection on our own values and interactions with the community and through transparency regarding our work and our values. It is also important to account for the time needed to establish trust between researchers and refugee communities.

- *Be transparent.* Our experiences all indicate the need to be explicitly transparent with refugee communities about the research and our capabilities in meeting some of their needs. A big part of doing that is by managing the expectations of refugee communities and other stakeholders. However, given the politically charged context, it is important to be aware of others' political stances and navigate through them, picking your battles as you go.

- *Leverage each other's work.* The humanitarian imperative and the diverse needs of refugee communities could be best met by collaborating with other researchers working on different issues faced by refugees.

- *Reflect with peers.* Researchers' emotional well-being and the challenges that present themselves in this field require them to constantly reflect on the work being conducted with peers working in similar contexts.

These guidelines share a lot with guidelines for conducting ethical research. However, we believe that

the high vulnerability of refugee communities and the complexity of the context in which the research is conducted require us to constantly revisit these guidelines and tailor them for HCI research with refugees.

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ENDNOTES

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