HCI, Digital Civics and the Refugee Crisis: Challenges at the Intersection of the Field

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Abstract

The plight of refugees across the world has reached a state of crisis. We wish to reflect on the current situation faced by refugee communities and outline how our interests as HCI and Digital Civics researchers aligns with this. Our particular research interests lie in the application of Digital Civics in refugee contexts, the potential for technology in low tech spaces, and questions of research sustainability in both formal and informal settlements populated by refugees. We consider this workshop to be a useful opportunity to critically reflect on how and why we want to engage with refugees in our work, and we hope to be able to contribute positively to discussions at this workshop.

Author Keywords

Refugees; HCI; Digital Civics; sustainability; low tech contexts.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m [Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI)]: Miscellaneous

Refugees and HCI

There are a reported 21.3m refugees across the world [14]. Refugees are not a new geopolitical issue nor a recent phenomenon, but constitute one of the most problematic outcomes of war and conflict. Conflict in countries including

Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and Sudan, amongst many others, has led to significant displacements of several millions of people and has contributed to a discourse of global crisis that has demanded the attention of governments and world media. Indeed, there is little doubt of the severity of the global situation and the reasons for this attracting the attention of HCI scholars.

Several studies to date have presented technological provocations to assist in the management of this crisis, including facilitating community building through participatory mapping within camps [15], capacity building through community informatics initiatives [1], communicating health issues within and beyond camps [7], digital storytelling to preserve and share their experiences with others [10], and resettlement in host communities [2, 4]. However, studies are still few in number and there is a lack of joined up thinking surrounding the issues that refugees face [12]. A reflection on research methods and the co-production of an agenda with both researchers and refugee populations, as proposed by this workshop, would begin to address these issues.

A critical examination of the role of HCI in the global refugee crisis is timely and relevant. We consider it represents a unique opportunity as researchers sharing interests in working with marginalised groups in both refugee and non-refugee contexts to critically reflect on the state of play and determine where we might be able to make a positive and meaningful contribution to this emerging field of study.

The Role of Digital Civics
Digital Civics seeks to address real world problems by scaffolding and building capacity within communities through technology [9]. Citizens are encouraged to rethink what it means to be an active citizen and as Digital Civics researchers, we seek to explore ways in which technology

Figure 1: Zaatari camp in Jordan [6].

can enable groups to overcome the barriers to participation in civic life. It is clear that refugees some of the toughest barriers of any group in society and thus work that seeks to enable their participation is immensely rewarding.

The position and barriers facing the refugees, and the limitation of resources in the settlements whether formal or informal, calls for entrepreneurial spirit and creative use of available resources [8]. One of our interests lies in observing and studying this appropriation of what is available in the settlement, as well as the social structure and power dynamics that emerge from self-organization. We consider this to be especially relevant for us as Digital Civics researchers exploring how individuals within communities can be supported to do more for themselves in the context of exclusion from civic processes [9].

Research in Low Technology Contexts

Secondly, we are keen to look beyond research contexts we are familiar with from our respective backgrounds and challenge ourselves to work within spaces such as refugee camps or neighbourhoods with infrastructure that cannot support digital interventions. As part of our ongoing development as researchers, we are striving to be reflexive and enhance our holistic understanding of the challenges in the field. Consequently, we wish to critically explore the possibilities and challenges of HCI research in "low tech"contexts and negotiate the challenges presented in these spaces with the support of community actors themselves. To illustrate what we consider to be "low tech", looking at two large camps for Syrian refugees in Jordan, Zaatari only has access to electricity for 11 hours of the day [8], whilst inhabitants of newly-settled Azraq rely on generators with very limited capacity [11].

In addition, we wish to query the ways in which technology can be used to support Digital Civics practice in these spaces, and we wish to keep an open mind to the possibility that technology might not be the best answer to the question being asked. Indeed, there are many contexts where a technological intervention might not be appropriate or desirable, and it is important to understand that it is just as valuable to know when something is not the answer as it is to know when it is [5]. We hope that by negotiating these challenges we can ensure that our research is relevant, impactful and able to be understood within a multiplicity of geographical, political and socio-economic contexts.

Towards Sustainable HCI with Refugees

Finally, we are interested in the sustainability aspect of working with refugees - a key issue for all HCI researchers, but amplified when working with those who are by their definition transient. Inhabiting a camp and being a refugee is intended to be temporary until permanent residence in their country of origin or destination can be sought. In reality, this is not always the case; the average stay in a refugee camp is 17 years [13], with some camps becoming permanent settlements in their own right, for a variety of factors. With this in mind, can we simultaneously look to avoid our work validating or at least contributing to this permanence, whilst understanding that the camp's temporariness might outlast generations?

Indeed, as HCI researchers we are striving for our design provocations to assume a longevity well beyond the deployment phase, and this is necessary if we are truly realise a new model of public service delivery envisioned in the Digital Civics agenda [9]. However, we wish to negotiate the ethical dilemma of authentically capturing the lived experiences of a transient group whilst simultaneously seeking their material improvement by helping to facilitate an exit from the conditions they are facing. We anticipate these considerations to cascade through our research process, from defining the research question itself, to evaluating the sustainability of the result or proposed solution.

Biographies

Sean Peacock   is a Doctoral Trainee in Digital Civics at Open Lab, Newcastle University, UK. His academic and professional background is in urban planning and sustainability. He is interested in how technology can be applied in challenging civic contexts to augment the participation of marginalised groups in society.

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Figure 2: A bakery shop made by residents in Zaatari camp [3].

low technology contexts.

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