Introduction

Linda Leung

The Special Focus section of this issue of *Refuge* is being edited by an "outsider" to Refugee Studies. By that I mean that my professional life has not focused on investigating refugee issues per se, but instead has been concerned with how technology is accessed and deployed by groups and communities. Therefore, what this Special Focus section offers are some different perspectives on technology's role in the refugee experience through the lenses of various disciplines that actually study technology adoption and uses. In doing this, I am hoping to begin an interdisciplinary dialogue between Refugee Studies and Technology Studies scholars about policies, models, and politics of technology provision, access and use with specific reference to refugee service provision in situations of displacement. To this end, I have also included contributions from other "outsiders" to encourage the sharing of data and knowledge across sectors.

In my own examinations of refugees' technology use in displacement settings[1] and during settlement,[2] it seems that the importance of technological tools and services to refugees has had little attention until recently. As can be expected, much of the literature within Refugee Studies is concerned with matters such as factors influencing forced migration, the provision of services in crisis situations, and systems of refugee administration. Yet there has been minimal examination of the role of technology in, for example, sustaining connections between displaced family members where contact is tenuous and at risk of being lost. Nor has there been much deliberation on the question of technology as a fundamental human right and therefore a basic necessity to which refugees should have access. In following this line of argument, other questions arise: which technologies are the most appropriate for refugees in camps and displacement settings? What are the practicalities of deploying such technologies on the ground? What inequalities emerge surrounding access to these technological tools and services? What are the repercussions of having limited or no access to such technologies for refugees who are displaced and those who have resettled?

Some of these questions have already begun to be addressed. A recent issue of *Forced Migration Review* (issue no. 38) presented a collection of short case studies of projects in the field, which largely focused on how new technologies were being used by aid organizations in providing services to refugees. The issue is very useful in highlighting the diversity and innovation of projects being undertaken on the ground.

I hope to augment these in this Special Focus section of *Refuge,* with more detailed examples and critical analysis by way of a comprehensive introduction to Technology Studies. The study of technology is not merely concerned with just the tools and devices that are commonly referred to as technologies. Rather, Technology Studies also investigates the systems of knowledge and meaning that are associated with technologies: for example, there is often an unquestioned causal relationship given to technology and socio-economic progress whereby everyone must "keep up" with the IT revolution by having a computer and having computer skills or be "left behind."[3] Technology Studies interrogates these ideas, examining how they make their way into policies such as establishing national high-speed broadband networks and ensuring every child has a laptop. Moreover, Technology Studies looks at how technologies and these ideas about technology are socially constructed and shaped.

The critical dimension offered by Technology Studies approaches is necessary to balance out a popular tendency to "evangelize" new technologies. Indeed, these positions represent the two main perspectives used to study technology: one is that of *social determinism,* whereby technological innovation and change is regarded as socially, politically, culturally, and economically situated; the other is *technological determinism,* which considers technology to be the catalyst for social change. The former perspective regards technology as shaped by humans. Actor-Network Theory[4] takes this a step further in arguing that the shaping of technology by humans has resulted in human reliance on technology, such that technology also shapes us. Technologies that we have created become a vital part of our lives and so

are important actors in the operation of our networks. In providing humans with agency, technology also has its own agency.

Social determinist or constructivist views are skeptical of utopian celebrations as well as pessimistic generalizations about new technology. Technological determinism tends to create those positive and negative assertions, such as "Facebook means that refugees will not lose contact with loved ones anymore" or "The use of Skype means that refugees no longer require access to telephones." Therefore, I encourage you to read the themed articles with these concepts in mind: does the availability of a particular technology inevitably lead to better social outcomes? Does access to technology necessarily mean that refugees' needs can be better represented?

Houssein Charmarkeh's article describes what can be achieved when refugees have access to tools of information, communication, and representation themselves. These opportunities to increase technical literacies while sustaining precarious connections with displaced family members often happen only once refugees are in countries of settlement. However, the Somalian participants in this study have already acquired reasonably high levels of technology literacy in their country of origin, enough to mobilize using social media whilst displaced and in transit.

In contrast, Linda Briskman's article examines the ways in which technologies can be used to oppress refugees in some of the most inhumane ways possible. Not only are they subject to state-sanctioned deprivation of communication technologies as part of mandatory immigration detention, they are also policed by technologies of control and surveillance. We see that low technologies—such as letter writing—can effectively allow refugees to subvert the technologies used against them in mandatory detention.

While Briskman contends that access to technology should be considered a part of communication as a human right as expressed in Article 19 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which includes "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers," Australia's system of mandatory detention apparently contradicts this non-binding provision. On the other hand, Jessica Anderson's article examines in detail how Article 19 is being implemented on the ground through the UNHCR's provision of technology as a basic need and service. The argument underpinning both of these articles is that very little communication, education, and everyday life can be conducted without technological mediation. This is also at the crux of Actor-Network Theory, which suggests that technology is an intrinsic part of our human agency: technologies are not neutral tools or objects, but have important roles in the operation of all networks. Furthermore, there

are unexpected uses and consequences in that while the primary objective might be to use technology to deliver education, the technology combined with the acquired skills was used for more pressing needs such as keeping in touch with displaced family and friends.

The comprehensive evaluation of the Community Technology Access initiative demonstrates the investment and effort required in establishing and maintaining an adequate technical infrastructure. Moreover, there needs to be assessment of whether such technologies are the most appropriate for the local community and whether less resource-intensive alternatives might be more suitable.

Issues of access and affordability do not pertain only to computers and the Internet, but to any technologies that might be seen as "solutions." In other words, simply making technologies available is not sufficient. There are access biases to be overcome such as the literacies—both language and technical—necessary for technology use. There are also gendered ways in which technology is accessed. Finance, too, often constitutes one of the greatest impediments to access.

Both Anderson's and Nora Danielson's papers discuss the UNHCR's policy of encouraging locally led initiatives and building the capacity of the communities in which their projects are located. This approach has the best potential for understanding the intricacies of technology availability, access, and affordability at a local level. This localized knowledge is crucial for practising what is known in technology disciplines as "user-centred design": socially determined technology solutions which emerge from the needs of the people who will ultimately use them. User-centred design is the opposite of "one-size fits all," off-the-shelf, top-down, or designer-led approaches. Rather, it advocates solutions that are tailored and have been developed with the input of the users themselves. Users can even be involved in co-creation, also known as participatory design.

Danielson's paper illustrates the particularities of Cairo, and the difficulties of implementing a standardized technology and communication strategy between service providers and refugees in such a densely populated but geographically sprawling city. The paper shows that while there is greater availability of technologies in urban environments—unlike in remote settings—issues of access and affordability remain. In this case, users are both service providers and refugees. The user research demonstrates that service providers are often gatekeepers to technology and have access to newer technologies such as the Internet and social media. Refugees, on the other hand, tend to utilize more traditional or lower technologies such as print and telephony. What kinds of solutions can be designed for two groups of users

who need to communicate and interact but utilize different types of technologies?

It is important to remember that while refugee communities and contexts differ, it is also necessary to look comparatively and at the "big picture" of technology use, access, and provision in order to develop appropriate standards and policies that ensure at least a minimum level of availability and service. Currently, refugee experiences of technology are not only diverse and disparate, but also largely interpreted through service providers. That is, there is a dearth of data that is primarily sourced from refugees themselves about their technology use. As a way of addressing this, I am making anonymized data, which I have collected from over one hundred surveys and interviews with refugees about their experiences of technology, publicly available for re/interpretation and analysis at http://trr.digimatter.com.

This online database is possibly the most comprehensive collection of primary data on refugees' technology use across various contexts of displacement, detention, and settlement. In sharing this data, I am encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration between students, scholars, and the fields of Refugee Studies and Technology Studies.

I appreciate the opportunity, as an "outsider" to Refugee Studies, to present in this Special Focus section of *Refuge* some key theories and ideas from Technology Studies. I hope that these can be used as conceptual lenses for examining the research findings in the themed papers, the raw data in my online database, and in future discussions about refugees and technology (such as in an upcoming special issue of the *Journal of Refugee Studies*).

Notes

1. L. Leung, C. Finney Lamb, and Emrys, *Technology's Refuge: the use of technology by asylum seekers and refugees* (Sydney: UTS ePress, 2009), http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/research/bitstream/handle/2100/928/TechnologysRefuge.pdf?sequence=1.
2. L. Leung, "Mind the Gap: Refugee and Communication Technology Literacy," Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, Sydney, 2011, http://accan.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=364:mind-the-gap-refugees-and-communications-technology-literacy&catid=103:general-communications&Itemid=170
3. F. Henwood et al., "Critical Perspectives on Technologies, In/equalities and the Information Society," in *Technology and In/equality,* ed. S. Wyatt, et al. (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.
4. J. Law and J. Hassard, eds., *Actor Network Theory and After* (Oxford and Keele: Blackwell and the Sociological Review, 1999).

Dr. Linda Leung is associate professor in the Institute for Interactive Media and Learning, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia.