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# Understanding Access beyond Information and Commodities: A Case Study of Refugees in Canada

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**Abstract**

Refugee migrants comprise 7 – 13% of the total number of immigrants Canada welcomes every year. The local government offers settlement programs for newcomers to help them adapt to life in Canada. However, these services are targeted towards newcomers in general, who are skilled workers mostly, and do not usually cater for the special needs of refugees. The goal of this research is to understand the challenges, and design computational support that can help refugees integrate faster and better into their new communities. In this paper, we use an ethnographically oriented lens to reflect on working as an interpreter with Syrian refugees in Canada for 20 months. Going beyond reporting the obvious needs for information and commodities, our study reveals a set of cultural and social challenges that can delay refugees' integration into the hosting communities.

**Author Keywords**

Refugees; social inclusion; ethnography; Canada.

**ACM Classification Keywords**

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

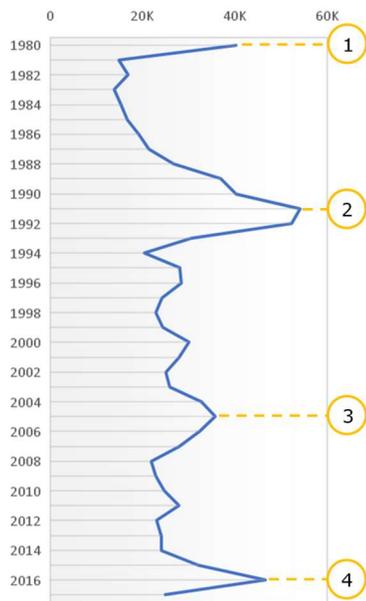


Figure 1: Canada's refugees' intake over the past four decades. Peaks: 1. Southeast Asian refugees due to oppressive regimes. 2. Sudanese and Somali refugees from arm conflicts. 3. Refugees from the 2003 Iraq invasion. 4. Syrian refugees due to civil armed conflicts [4].

## Introduction

Canada is known for its organized immigration system. Refugee migrants are part of this system and they form 7 - 13% of the total number of immigrants per year. However, this percentage fluxgates whenever there is a humanitarian crisis around the globe that produce a significant number of refugees. Under such circumstances, the number of refugees Canada welcomes rises between 15% - 90% over a period of three years as illustrated in Figure 1 [12, 13]. While studies have shown that refugees believe in the role of social support to enhance health and reduce loneliness and isolation; the presence of cultural conflicts, struggle for employment, inadequate knowledge of resources, language difficulties, and lack of transportation lead to insufficient interaction of the refugee migrants with their new communities [14]. This disconnect can create the problem of social exclusion and may stall the process of assimilation [3].

Several studies have been conducted in Canada over the past decade, especially in the last five years, to determine the challenges refugees experience in their new home [2, 8, 14, 15, 17]. These studies assert the need to improve services access and implement culturally relevant programs, collaborative networking approaches, and policies that focus on addressing these issues. However, there is only a handful initiatives to achieve those and they are mainly within the health sector [2, 17]. We believe that carefully designed digital technologies can bridge this gap. However, making a technology accessible to a refugee community, and resolve the cultural differences constitute a significant challenge for the researchers.

To understand these challenges better, we present our

personal experience of working with refugees in the great Toronto Area in Canada. We frame the challenges we recognized from this work within the three modes of communication for social inclusion Iris Marion Young identified in her book "Inclusion and Democracy" [20]. Moreover, we provide some design recommendations for each of the modes to better serve the refugees.

### Canada's refugee system

Canada has a central immigration services (except the Province of Quebec). The first step starts when The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) identifies refugees for resettlement by granted them refugee status. A person cannot apply directly to Canada for resettlement. Rather, once a refugee is identified, Canada considers three options for settlement: Government-assisted program, *Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR)* program, and private sponsorship program [9]. The main differences between these types are from where the money comes to support the refugees for the full sponsorship period - usually one year - and who offers the emotional support.

In a government-assisted program, the refugees are given income support from the government. Basic social assistance is given to help guide the amount of money refugees get for shelter, food and other things [9]. In the *BVOR* program, the immigration office matches refugees identified for resettlement by the UNHCR with private sponsors in Canada. In this set-up, refugees get six months of financial income support from the government while private sponsors provide six months of financial support and a year of social and emotional support [11]. Lastly, in the private sponsorship program, a sponsor must agree to give emotional and financial support to the refugee for the

full sponsorship period [10]. Sponsors can be organizations that have signed sponsorship agreements with the Government of Canada, community sponsors, or groups of 5 people who live in the same area [9].

Refugees are granted permanent residency status, similar to other types of immigrants, from the moment they arrive to Canada. Moreover, the government fund 'welcome centers' that help newcomers settle down and adapt to the life in Canada. The services include language classes, building resume, searching for jobs and so on. However, these services are targeted towards newcomers generally, who are mostly skilled workers immigrants [12], and do not usually cater for many things that the refugees often need [15].

### **Related work**

#### *Co-designing Workshops and ethnography*

There have been several studies conducted to identify the challenges refugees face, in camps or in countries they migrated to, and recommend design practices. For example, *Teen Design Days* [5] is a scalable and portable methodology used on site to enable researchers to explore concepts, test ideas, and create designs with youth efficiently in safe settings and in culturally and gender appropriate ways. Drawn on this work, Fisher et al [7] aimed to identify refugees' needs in camps to inform humanitarian response. They held series of participatory design workshops with youth refugees in Za'atari refugee camp to create paper prototypes of visionary devices for helping their community and analyzed the designs for themes using qualitative techniques. This helped provide context for the community's daily lives challenges including information problems and limited access to education.

Fisher et al [6] performed an ethnographic research to explore the spatial, temporal and infrastructural challenges that need to be considered when designing the Za'atari refugee camp cookbook. Over the course of two years, data were collected through various methods such as design spec sheet drawings and narratives, interviews, and researchers' observational notes. The paper concluded that design ethnography and co-design are useful tools to document the experiences among the refugees and the researchers to create interactive digital components. Similarly, Talhouk et al. [19] identified contextual and cultural factors that can inform the design of digital technologies to support refugee Access to Antenatal Care (ANC). Mesmar et al. [16] reviewed the current digital technologies used by humanitarian actors (such as UNHCR) and displaced populations, examined their impact on health and well-being of affected populations, and considered the opportunities for and challenges faced by users of these technologies. Their work emphasizes the importance of dialogue between technology designers and the populace affected by humanitarian crises to increase "relevance and sustainability of innovations."

#### *Digital tools implementations*

There exist some digital tools developed specifically for refugees in migrant countries. For example, Sandre and Newbold [17] explored the effectiveness of telemedicine services in bridging the gap between refugees' health and health-services accessibility in Canada. Ahmed et al [2] developed a multi-risk Computer-assisted Psychosocial Risk Assessment (CaPRA) tool for Afghan refugees visiting community health centers in Canada. This tool offers a promising model to integrate medical and social care to address

the health and settlement needs of refugees. Because smart phones are commonly used among refugees [18], many researchers have tried to utilize them in refugee camps to enhance the quality of lives there. For example, Kircket [1] is a mobile application where refugees, volunteers, or any person can tag their current location with an icon and a message. Google Translation is often used to help the refugees understand a foreign language. While all these technologies are making significant progress in making information and commodities available for the refugees, there has still been a challenge in giving the refugees full access to the host community.

#### *Philosophy of social inclusion*

We turn to political philosopher, Iris Marion Young, to understand how proper access can be given to a community. Young [20] suggested three actions to ensure a proper access of a community to the social and political sphere of another community. First, greetings – the host community should welcome the migrants with proper manner. This means that the host community should get rid of any negative or discriminatory idea that they have about the refugees. Second, rhetoric – this means that the host community should learn the way the refugees communicate. Third, storytelling – both the refugees and the hosts should be able to communicate with each other by telling their stories. We bring Young's theory to analyze our empirical data to understand where the social access is missing for the refugee communities in Canada, and how we can address those gaps.

#### **Methods**

The first author, who also conducted the field study, is of Iraqi roots and fluent in Arabic. She worked as a

volunteer interpreter for Syrian refugees at the Arab Community Center in Toronto, Canada from February 2016 until November 2017. Her duties included interpreting conversations, building social bridges between refugees and their sponsors, and translating documents (such as for rent contracts). Because the sponsors of many refugee families were from other cities, she acted as a city guide to the refugees and their sponsors to advice about location of potential dwellings, public transit, markets and so on. She documented (in written notes) her work experience and observations with the refugees and their sponsors while working. She also conducted 8 informal interviews of the refugees during this time. The interviews were taken in Arabic, and were later translated into English for transcription.

#### *Participants*

There were around 4-6 sponsors for every family. The sponsors were all westerners. The researcher helped 7 refugee families settle in the Great Toronto Area. They were sponsored either through the *BVOP* or the private sponsorship program. Six families migrated from Jordan and one family came from Turkey. The average number of: members in a family is 4, children is 2, age of the mothers is early thirties, ages of the fathers is late thirties, children age is 8 years. The average age of children is known because the researcher was told how old they were for school registration purposes. However, the ages of the spouses are not known for all of them because it was considered inappropriate to ask their ages. Hence, approximation was used. Most parents in the refugee families stopped their education after middle school.

## Findings

Here we present three cases, each using one of Young's mode of communications. These cases are collected from the personal notes of the ethnographer while working with the refugees.

### Case 1

*"I noticed that refugee migrants were not moving freely within the cities they settled in. This was because the refugees usually travelled by foot to nearby places (which is not ideal since most refugees are placed in suburbs where urbanism is dispersed), or depended on their sponsors to drive them around. As for owning a car, it usually took them at least one year to afford a car. They did not use public transit extensively even though the cities they lived in had good quality public transit system in terms of area coverage, frequency, and ticket prices. This was because the refugees come from environments where organized public transit system within a city is almost absent or, if it exists, it is mainly for men. Hence, many refugees face cultural challenges when using public transit system due to the lack of knowledge of such system. "*

This case can be viewed within Young's *Greeting* lens: a form of communication where *"a subject directly recognizes the subjectivity of others, thereby fostering trust."* The public transit systems in the hosting communities are designed for English speaking users who know what a transit system is. This design is not welcoming the refugees to use the public transit as it does not recognize their abilities. There is a need to design a platform that teaches refugees the transit system from scratch: how to comprehend a transit map, how to read the display screen on the bus, and what is needed to plan a trip. Language is indeed a

significant barrier so the suggested framework needs to be in a communication system that they can identify such as visual illustrations.

### Case 2

*"The sponsors met refugees sometimes without me due to time restrictions. One time, a refugee told me to clear the confusion about what her 3-year-old son did to one of the lady sponsors because he thought of her as his mother. She did not give more information because she may have thought that because I was from a middle eastern background, I should know what the confusion was but I did not. Upon asking for more details, it turned out that the little boy kissed the hand of the sponsor as a gesture of appreciation because he considered her as a mother. The sponsor was surprised with this behavior and the refugee thought that the sponsor was angry. The sponsor was startled certainly as she had never been exposed to such behavior but she was not annoyed. "*

Young's *Rhetoric* refers to the way assertions and arguments are expressed. Usually refugees come from a culture that is dissimilar to the western one. Some of the facial expressions, tone of voice, and hand gesture are acceptable in one culture but not another. The misunderstanding can happen from either the refugees or the people from the hosting communities as both sides are usually not very familiar with one another's values. We need an application that translates actions and expression (written and facial) and not only 'literal' translation or words.

### Case 3

*"I was asked to interpret for a sick, middle-aged man in a hospital. He wanted to share a story from his past life*

*with me. The story was about his family and marriage. It was very interesting to me for two reasons, First, knowing how his life struggles before the civil war, and how seeking asylum in nearby country worsened the living conditions even more, affected the refugee's mentality and made him more protective of his family. Moreover, this translated into trying to appear very strong in front of other people which caused him to acquire health issues. The second reason this was intriguing is because I understood how the concept of family and marriage differ across cultures. While in the west we do not accept certain behaviors, these same actions can be of benefit if conducted in different communities."*

This fits into the significance of Young's *Narrative*: to foster "understanding among communicators with very different experience or assumptions about what is important." Being a sponsor, a service provider or an app developer, there is an urgent need to know the background of these refugees in order to understand their behaviors, what is important to them, and how to best offer services for them. We recommend designing a platform for storytelling that the refugee migrants are comfortable in using and/or contributing to.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Rather than stating the conventional struggles of refugees in Canada for information and commodities, we seek to understand the deeper challenges of integrating refugees in their new communities. The series of events every refugee faced is renevant as much as their unfamiliarity with the new culture: from the dwelling regulations, to the transit system, to accepting the mosaic society of Canada. Our initial results demonstrate that these challenges are

important to address, and yet little has been done to do so.

Analyzing our observations for themes using Young's mode of communication helped us provide a rich context for the refugees' daily life and their struggles. The insights we gained through this initial round of work indicates further exploration in this area that may help identify and address the refugees' needs better and inform the implementation of policies and applications specifically targeted towards vulnerable migrants. Our suggested deign implications are broad in terms of implementation at this point. However, we believe that these implications will inspire future research on designing technologies for the refugees both in Canada and in many other places around the world.

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