Technology and power in immigration detention: Communicating fear in and about detained asylum seekers

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Abstract: The paper examines how fear is communicated to refugees, asylum seekers, and the public through Australia’s immigration policy and practice. Between 1992 and 1994, Australian law moved from permitting (but not enforcing) limited detention of asylum seekers, to a blanket policy of mandatory detention which, at one point, had up to 12,000 individuals in detention.

The author argues that the deployment of technology is instrumental in conveying this fear, ranging from the technologies of containment, surveillance, and identification used in immigration detention centres (IDCs) to the prohibited access to information and communication technologies to detained asylum seekers. These practices suggest that the liberating possibilities of technology become a source of fear when available to those considered undeserving of such freedom.

The strict regulation of detainees’ use of technology, based on unwritten policies which allow access to certain kinds of media while prohibiting others, plays on the perceived dangers of new technology. Fear exists where there is the possibility of asylum seekers creating their own space, and where systems and technologies of border control can be subverted. The fear of providing asylum seekers with access to technology emerges from tacit assumptions about the capacity for new technologies to facilitate borderlessness.

The Australian context of asylum seeker administration sets up extreme dualisms between those who control policies and practices of technology use in immigration detention and those who are subject to/incarcerated by them. Such binary oppositions are intended to permit those who wield such technologies to generate fear in asylum seekers (current and future), their supporters, and the wider public.
Introduction

This paper is concerned with where two fears intersect. Australia’s fear of asylum seekers and refugees has already been well-documented in studies of media representations, government policies and public attitudes. The paper takes this acknowledged fear as its departure point. Journeying into the world of immigration detention centres, the essay explores how such fears of asylum seekers become enmeshed with fear of technology in the day-to-day administration of mandatory detention. The premise that the seeking of refuge is inevitably mediated and regulated by technology underpins this Australian case study.

Technology is critical to the management of immigration detention centres and the detainees incarcerated within them. Technologies of surveillance generate fear amongst detainees and those who dare to visit them. They determine and patrol the boundaries of containment, those who are able to move between them, and act as signifiers of the consequences of unauthorised crossings. The policing of space through technology is regarded as vital in dealing with asylum seekers, the ultimate ‘space invaders’.

Inside immigration detention centres, detainees’ claim for space (both national and physical) is restricted by limiting their access to technology. Such practices speak to the combined fears of refugees and the potential creation of space enabled by technology. The liberating possibilities of technology become a source of fear when available to those considered undeserving of such freedom.

Reflecting on her experiences as a visitor to asylum seekers in immigration detention centres, the author examines the nexus between asylum seekers as signifiers of space invasion, and technology as a signifier of space creation and delineation. She argues that the strict regulation of detainees’ use of technology, based on unwritten policies which allow access to certain kinds of media while prohibiting others, plays on the perceived dangers of new technology. However, the recycling of such fears is born from and parallels the utopian promises which emerge with the advent of each generation of new technology. The residual effects of such rhetoric infiltrate the administration of immigration detention in terms of assuming new technologies to be dangerous when accessible to feared and marginalised groups such as refugees.
Background and methodology

In Australia official and widespread misperception of refugees as “queue jumpers” (MacCallum, 2002) has been instrumental in enabling the legislative changes requiring mandatory detention of persons arriving in Australia without a visa. Between 1992 and 1994, Australian law moved from permitting (but not enforcing) limited detention of asylum seekers, to a blanket policy of mandatory detention (HREOC, 2004) which, at one point, had up to 12,000 individuals in detention (Castan Centre for Human Rights Law, 2003, para 4).

Anyone who enters Australian territories purporting to be a refugee escaping from persecution, political instability, war, natural disaster, and famine in their home country is immediately and indefinitely detained in an immigration detention centre (IDC) until their claims are verified. Australia’s Migration Act 1958 section 189 states that anyone who does not have a valid visa must be detained until that person either obtains a visa or leaves Australia.

While mandatory detention has been part of an explicit strategy aimed at deterring asylum seekers from entering Australian shores, policies relating to asylum seekers’ rights while detained have been far less transparent. This paper emerges from a research project examining how asylum seekers access and use information and communication technologies in situations of displacement, specifically exploring this in the context of immigration detention. The key research questions addressed by the research were: what kinds of technologies are available to refugees? How are these used? How are their benefits and limitations perceived? What, if any, virtual communities surround these technologies? How are relationships of power surrounding these technologies negotiated? Can technology assist refugees in sustaining connections with their virtual communities and reducing their sense of isolation? Can technology play a role in reducing the well-documented effects of this incarceration by providing mediated social interaction? What are the implications for policy, especially in relation to allowable technologies and surveillance of communication practices?

Access to informants was gained by working with refugee community advocacy groups, which have established links with refugees in detention and experience in dealing with the management of detention centres. Such groups include ChilOut and
Amnesty International, which organise visitor programmes to IDCs. These affiliations were important in gaining access to and trust of detainees who were willing to participate in the research. They presented opportunities to interact with detainees on a social basis. Surveys and semi-structured interviews with the research subjects were conducted to ascertain levels of technological literacy before and after coming to Australia, and how this was affected by indefinite incarceration.

As there is no publicly available written policy on technology access, and as practices differ across immigration detention centres, the information in this paper has been based on the empirical data gathered from detainees, and the author's record of her fieldwork experiences as a visitor to asylum seekers in IDCs. It has not been verified by the management of detention centres.

**Technologies of fear: A journey inside an immigration detention centre**

As I was driving in the car on the way [to the IDC], I thought about all the technologies which keep me connected to others. I had my mobile phone by my side in case I had to contact someone, or if someone wanted to contact me. As long as I have this, I am part of a communication network. But I wouldn’t be allowed to bring this in.

I was glad to be going with [some more experienced visitors], as they offered to direct me there in a car convoy, and escort me through the procedures required to enter the world of immigration detention. They were my protective panopticon within a more oppressive one. They would also be my connection to the outside world once inside when my ties with other networks are relinquished.

The architectural manifestation of this severed connection is evident in the chain mesh fencing and razor wire, surrounding what would otherwise be a park with outdoor tables and seating – the physical limitation on free movement. The physical environment’s influence on the psyche is clear when detainees do not come out to meet their visitors. Their names are called out on a loud speaker, but they begin to limit their own contact with the outside world in response to the imposed restrictions.

I was stopped at the street entrance by the guard who spotted me carrying a mobile phone. I was instructed to leave it in the car. [My companion] was also told to leave her handbag in the car.

When we arrived at the shed, we attempted to complete our 3 forms with the 2 pens available, one of which didn’t work. We proceeded through a guarded gate into the visitor’s centre, each
took a ticket and waited for our number to be called. We managed to coordinate who we would request to see, as detainees are only allowed into the visitor’s courtyard if their name is called on the loud speaker.

I was ‘processed’ first: I submitted my driver’s licence, declared I had been before so they could retrieve my details from the database. They cross-check who I have requested to visit (in case they’ve been deported), and put an identifying wristband on me. The guard told us to collectively keep our stuff together in a locker, which had to be negotiated with a code that gave you your assigned locker, and a PIN of your choice to open the locker. Once this hurdle was overcome, we tackled the X-ray conveyor belt and the metal detector one by one, after which we were then stamped with invisible ink. The next stop was handing our forms onto another guard, who presses the button to release the door and yells the names of the visited detainees out over a loud speaker. The final stage is a guard who notes down the numbers on the wristbands before letting you into the compound.

The loudspeaker blares out their names, and it is only through the subsequent haphazard delays that one can only guess that they either haven’t heard from the inner compound, or don’t want to come out. Then begins the process of having someone go in to find and fetch them (Extract from unpublished fieldwork diary, July 2005).

It is important to note that visitation procedures change constantly and vary across detention centres. Regardless, technologies have been central to the ways in which refugees have been administered. In the example above, technology fulfils a number of utilitarian purposes such as containment, surveillance and identification. Perimeter technologies serve to isolate those who are detained from the outside world and vice versa. Security technologies determine who and what are allowed to pass through the boundaries delineating inside and outside. Verification technologies confirm those who are permitted to return to the outside world once they have ventured inside. These are all part of the operations of IDCs, which themselves are like ‘blackbox’ technologies in that they are mysterious and “largely shrouded in official secrecy” (ACHSSW, 2006, p. 6).

In addition to the practical application of such technologies, there is also an affective function to them: to instil a sense of fear and apprehension in those who are subject to them. This can be described as their emotional design, that which goes beyond their utility. The emotional design of IDCs exhibit all the characteristics of negative affect such as anxiety, fear and anger (Norman, 2004). Such a design strategy is intended
for those who are incarcerated by these technologies and those who dare to disrupt the relationship between inside and outside by visiting detainees. There is a clear asymmetry between those who design, use, and control the technology (immigration detention centre staff) and those who are subject to their processes and effects (detainees and their visitors). Techno-dystopian commentators describe such a relationship as one of ‘master and slave’, and part of a wider social alienation that is facilitated by technology.

The abovementioned technologies are intended to generate fear in detainees and their visitors at the micro-level, day-to-day operations of immigration detention. However, they also play on a long history of pessimistic discourses in which technology features as a potent source of fear. CCTV, voice and fingerprint scanners, lie detector tests, smart cards, computer viruses, the atom bomb, nuclear weapons, are all examples of technologies premised upon fear (Mulgan, 1996). Indeed, the engineering of such fear through detention technologies has been extremely successful according to refugees themselves, who write about IDCs as “cages”, “caves”, “prisons” and “dens of frustration”, which are cold and black, such as this example from Another Country, an anthology of writings by refugees and asylum seekers:

Instead of a small cage, the great men have made a great cage and named it detention.

Instead of a small bird, the great men have placed miserable human beings behind bars.

And instead of open doors, they have made great doors

Under lock and key with a chain.

Wait, wait years if necessary...

Not outside, but inside. (Zandavar, 2004, p. 8)

At a more macro-level, the pivotal role of fear in the deployment of technologies operates as part of a policy context designed to make the seeking of safe haven in Australia wholly unappealing. It is not only addressed at its immediate subjects – those who are already detained – but to anyone considering seeking asylum in Australia. The 2001 Federal election illustrated that when the (then) government’s policies and practices of mandatory immigration detention are called into question, the rhetoric of fear can convey to larger local and global publics that asylum seekers
‘ought’ to or ‘should’ be feared, and hence, the application of technologies which maintain this fear factor are supposedly justified.

Systems and sub-systems of fear

In the discipline of Refugee Studies, the role of technology is implicit in much of the literature. Although it rarely makes explicit mention of technologies, it is effectively concerned with them nonetheless. For example, much has been written in the areas of systems of immigration administration, such as comparison of different methods of managing refugees, particularly between Australia and the UK, Canada and the USA (see HREOC, 2004. The Australian system has been designed to make the seeking of asylum unattractive, risky and opaque. It has been constructed as a technology of prevention and exclusion, as articulated through its policy and practice of mandatory and indefinite detention.

In addition to systems of administering asylum seekers, there are technologies of representation which complement them, such as print, broadcast and online media. These are also large systems that reflect and inform public attitudes towards refugees. Indeed, media technologies have been instrumental in escalating moral panics surrounding the seeking of asylum (see Mares, 2002; McMaster, 2002; Kushner & Knox, 1999) and in perpetuating the widespread misperception of refugees as “queue jumpers” (MacCallum, 2002. In this sense, media technologies occupy as much of a divisive role in terms of delineating between Us (Australians) and Them (asylum seekers and refugees) as the technologies of control and surveillance found in immigration detention centres.

Understood in this way, technologies are not neutral but are part of political practices. They are defined not only as tangible objects, but also by their associated processes, practices, relationships, and effects (Henwood et al., 2001). They are subject to the different motivations of those who design them, and those who use and are affected by them. Thus, the flipside of how these large systems of administration and representation are designed, is how they are actually experienced by asylum seekers and refugees, how they are negotiated at the interface, on the ground. Therefore, refugee research has also been concerned with the testing of those systems, particularly how they perform in critical situations, such as in the provision of basic
health and education services to refugees (see Mares & Jureidini, 2003; RANZCP, 2003; Hodes, 2002).

The discipline of Cultural Studies has specifically examined the ways in which macro-technological systems are contested. Examples include Paul Gilroy (1987)’s work on the Black Atlantic, which notes that books and records have been vital in carrying oppositional ideologies and philosophies across the black diaspora in response to the lack of black representation in the media. Within Asian diasporas, the exchange of video letters and taped Bollywood movies have been interpreted as forms of localised challenges to the centralised power of the broadcast media industries (Ang, 1996; Gillespie, 1995). While these micro-level struggles with technologies of representation have been studied in relation to issues of migration and marginalisation, equivalent research on refugees’ experiences at the ‘coalface’ of immigration administration is wanting.

However, it is clear that capacity for individual agency, or ‘workarounds’, or even subversion of large systems constituted by technologies which have been deemed secure and reliable, is a powerful source of fear to those who have designed them. The tenuous state of displacement and mobility of asylum seekers directly challenges Australia’s large, static and protective systems of immigration administration. They are a sobering reminder of the ways in which other large systems have been undermined even with the lowest of technologies: during the Cold War, the former Soviet government could not jam all the signals from the BBC or Voice of America; Singapore’s ban on domestic satellite dishes and certain web sites has not prevented people from accessing disallowed content (Mulgan, 1996). Therefore, the restrictions to asylum seekers’ access to information and communication technologies whilst in immigration detention play on fears that access to information empowers minority groups and extends their capabilities in the same ways that a microscope extends the eyes, mechanical devices extend the muscles, and computers extend human intelligence (Mulgan, 1996).

Seeking asylum in technology

Australia’s system of mandatory detention of asylum seekers is premised upon the maintenance of space. Technologies of imprisonment are deployed to protect Australians from the ‘invasion’ of their space by those who have made spontaneous
border crossings. The spatial status quo is maintained through the fortification of immigration detention centres such that asylum seekers are given only a limited amount of space. Fear exists where there is the possibility of asylum seekers creating their own space, and where those systems and technologies of border control can be subverted. The fear of providing asylum seekers with access to technology emerges from tacit assumptions about the capacity for new technologies to facilitate borderlessness: “Many asylum seekers were held in separate ‘closed camps’ and were not able to access telephones, newspapers, TV or mail for periods of up to 12 months” (ACHSSW, 2006, p. 29)

But detainees do have access to technology: they are surrounded, surveyed, and held captive by it. In the case of one IDC visited by the author, detainees have access to payphones, faxes, photocopiers, television, video – technologies which may all be characterised as low-tech, analogue, ‘old media’. Visitors are allowed to give detainees phone cards so they can use the pay phones without charge or the need for change. In addition to payphones, detainees are provided with access to a fax and photocopier, which are generally used to liaise with and send relevant documentation to lawyers. Detainees distrust using the fax machine at the detention centre because it is in a management office area and they require permission to use it. It means the guards can read the faxes that are sent, as well as those that are received before notifying the detainees that they have received one. Detainees also have television, videos, DVDs and newspapers. There are computers available, so some detainees load computer games on them to play. Others have Playstation in their rooms. The standalone computers, photocopier and fax machine tend to be used for more formal types of correspondence, such as to lawyers, the department or minister. They tend not be used for personal correspondence with family.

It is noteworthy that the only technology to which detainees have access and which facilitates real-time, person-to-person interaction is the telephone. The phone offers the opportunity for direct contact without the visual and other sensory realities of detention. For informal interactions, reliance on the telephone is typical for most detainees who have families on the outside whether local or abroad.

Because there is no explicit policy regarding access to technology whilst in immigration detention, there is inconsistency across detention centres and what is
permitted changes over time. Items that have been regarded as security risks by detention centre management have included crochet hooks, rollerblades, tape recorders, soccer boots, DVDs, wallets, nail polish, pencils and pens (ACHSSW, 2006). However, the technologies which are especially not allowed and which generate the most fear are those which are new, and enable mobility and the creation of space. Just as detainees’ physical movement is constrained, so is the potential to freely occupy or construct any kind of virtual environment. It is the formation of networks which impedes space and crosses boundaries: in the case of asylum seekers, those networks are weak because their strong ties (to family, community, homeland) have been undermined if not severed altogether due to displacement and detention (Leung, 2007).

What does this suggest about the perceived dangers of ‘new media’ and the resonance of last century’s techno-utopian discourses from which we believed we have progressed? Given that detainees are only given access to old media, it seems that this tired but resolutely upbeat rhetoric about new technology which celebrates it as inherently liberating has actually inflected policies determining the kinds of technologies to which detainees have access. Fears that accompanied previous technologies – such as the personal stereo’s ability to build an acoustic space from which users can retreat from everyday life (Cranny-Francis, 2005) – have been recycled and translated for newer technologies. Computers, especially those which are networked, still appear to be a potent source of fear (Mulgan, 1996). The Internet was only introduced to IDCs at the beginning of 2007, with heavy access restrictions: detainees have a maximum of one hour per day, are not permitted to view blogs or discussion boards, or ‘create’ their own content (such as their own web pages). If detainees have their own computers, they cannot pay for their own Internet access: modems are removed before the computer can be used. Therefore, technology use is obstructed so that only low-tech passive consumption, rather than active experimentation, is allowed. Such technologies of virtual space creation are considered threatening in the hands of those who have physically made unauthorised border crossings. Those who cannot remain within their own perimeters are perceived as undeserving of such technology. The technology signifies a way of being (that is free, mobile, always accessible, and always able to access), but it also connotes an ideal type of user, one that is appropriate and worthy of such technology. It seems
that refugees are not entitled to space or mobility and, therefore, do not have rights to media that are considered to facilitate these qualities, in spite of their detention.

While simplistic dichotomies between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’, ‘master’ and ‘slave’ traditionally used in debates about access to technology seem outdated, the role of technology in immigration detention is precisely to establish and maintain these binary oppositions as a means of keeping the fear quotient high.

**Conclusion**

Fear is designed as part of the Australian system of immigration administration. It is evident at a policy level in mandatory and indefinite detention, at a practical level in the sub-systems of immigration detention centre management, and in complementary systems of media representation.

The Australian context of asylum seeker administration sets up extreme dualisms between those who design/control/use technologies of immigration detention and those who are subject to/incarcerated by them. Such binary oppositions are intended to permit those who wield such technologies to generate fear in asylum seekers (current and future), their supporters, and the wider public.

The possibility that large, reliable, secure technologies which police space can be undermined or contested by newer, mobile, adaptable technologies which create virtual spaces is also a fearful prospect. The assumptions of freedom and democracy embedded in the latter are implicit in policies which deny refugees access to new technologies which would allow them to move freely within virtual space to communicate with the world outside the detention centre. The ‘liberating’ nature of such technology is regarded as unsafe in the hands of refugees, whose freedom of movement is institutionally contained by the Australian government through mandatory detention. Thus, asylum seekers in immigration detention are subject to the conceptual legacies of techno-utopianism and offer a sobering reminder of their long-lasting and potentially detrimental effects.
References


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