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## **Detained through a Smartphone: Deploying Experimental Collaborative Visual Methods to Study the Socio-Technical Landscape of Digital Confinement** 2021

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## **Methodological Reflections**



# Detained through a Smartphone

## Deploying Experimental Collaborative Visual Methods to Study the Socio-Technical Landscape of Digital Confinement

*Carolina Sanchez Boe and Henry Mainsah*

### Abstract

*The facial recognition software SmartLink is being increasingly deployed as an “alternative to detention” by ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement), along with other surveillance technologies such as voice recognition and electronic ankle shackles. Rather than being a proper “alternative” to immigrant detention, these technologies have become an addition to the ever-increasing detention numbers, spreading confinement into immigrant communities and homes. These new forms of enforcement technologies constitute an understudied aspect of surveillance capitalism, as they are deployed with the active involvement of private companies with for-profit motives.*

*This article draws on an experimental collaborative visual methodology enacted by an anthropologist, a design scholar, a lawyer and a participant with personal experience seeking asylum and being monitored through SmartLINK®. Together, we revisit visual material generated as part of ethnographic fieldwork on “digital confinement”. Using a walkthrough method, we proceed to conduct a collaborative analysis of Smartlink, its technological features, data generation, and cultural representations. Conducting research with someone who is constantly under surveillance through her cell-phone raises specific methodological and ethical issues, and in our article we call for participatory alliances and relational ethics when researching regimes of digital confinement.*

### Keywords

*Facial Recognition Apps; Immigration Enforcement; Digital Confinement; Collaborative Visual Methodologies; Walkthrough Method*

“The official said that the alternative would be better than detention, but it is nasty. Very nasty”, says Lorena about her experience of subjection to electronic monitoring through a facial recognition app. Like 225,000<sup>1</sup> other foreign-nationals in the USA, Lorena, an asylum seeker who has fled violence in Guatemala, is submitted to so-called “alternatives to detention” (ATD) under the “Intensive Supervision and Appearance Program” (ISAP), which combines GPS tracking with electronic ankle monitors, voiceprint verification and facial recognition apps. After crossing the southern border to the USA, Lorena was detained in an immigration detention centre by ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement), and was released with an ankle monitor. She was later submitted to voiceprint verification (VoiceID), then required to install facial recognition app SmartLINK®. Besides weekly “check-ins” where she has to take a photo of herself in a certain way and at a precise moment, she is required to have her smartphone on her, her battery charged and her GPS turned on at all times. She does not know when her supervision will end, nor whether she will be granted asylum or be deported today, tomorrow, in a month or after several years.

Experiences such as Lorena’s are an illustrative example of new forms of enforcement technologies which produce and uphold internal borders within the USA. They constitute an understudied aspect of surveillance capitalism, as much research has focused on extractions of data for consumption and elections that target the middle-class in the global North (Zuboff 2019), or on surveillance technologies deployed on citizen minorities (e.g., Browne 2015; Eubank 2019). However, the use of facial recognition technologies for border enforcement is a major and expanding market. Between 2006 and 2021 alone, budgets for digital alternatives to detention have increased from \$28m to \$440m, while the budget for detention increased from \$1 billion to \$2.8 billion, as shown by a recent report by Just Futures Law and Mijente (2021). In February 2022, President Biden asked Congress to validate a budget that would increase the number of immigrants submitted to alternatives to detention from 169,000 to 400,000 within a year, with a clear tendency towards an increased use of the facial recognition app SmartLINK® at the expense of electronic ankle monitoring and voice verification.

The deployment of electronic monitoring as an alternative to confinement behind physical walls and fences is not a new phenomenon. In the late 1970s, Judge Jack Love, a New Mexico district court judge, read a Spiderman comic, where Spiderman’s nemesis, the Kingpin, strapped a transmitter onto the superhero’s wrist in order to track him anywhere he went (Lyon 1994: 42). Judge Love found that a similar transmitter could help relieve jail and prison overcrowding, and a Colorado-based company, BI Incorporated, developed the device. BI Incorporated was later bought by GEO Group, one of the world’s largest prison and detention contractors (Schenwar/Law 2020: 41). Electronic ankle monitors spread

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1 According to figures from [www.ice.gov](http://www.ice.gov), April 2022.

in the criminal justice systems of the US and beyond; however, in most instances, it was not an alternative to prison but an additional form of control (Schenwar/Law 2020). ICE started contracting with BI Incorporated in 2004, when the agency initiated its Alternatives to Detention program, first monitoring foreign-nationals who had been sentenced to prison, then detained, and who, for various reasons, could not be deported (Boe 2020a). The program has since expanded to include persons who would otherwise never have been detained, including asylum seekers apprehended at the southern border, like Lorena.

Rather than being an “alternative” to immigrant detention, these technologies have become an addition to ever-increasing detention numbers, spreading confinement into immigrant communities and homes, ensuring great wealth and lobbying power for private prison companies. These re-invest some of the resulting profit to influence detention policy, ensure more government contracts, and impede reforms that would hurt their interests, as Gilman and Romero’s (2018) research shows. Today, GEO Group profits from *both* the expansion of detention *and* of digital alternatives to detention, just as the for-profit company benefited from the parallel expansion of prisons and of electronic monitoring for probation. Tech companies are also rapidly moving into immigration enforcement as a new market for their products.

The use of applications such as SmartLINK® for monitoring migrants since 2017 is part of a wider trend in recent times involving the steady use of networked information technologies in emerging policing practices, sometimes coined as “predictive”, “smart”, “big data” and “platform” policing (Brayne 2017; Byler 2022; Ferguson 2017; Jefferson 2020; Wood 2019). Researchers in the humanities and social sciences have underlined the need to devise methods for addressing the realities of the “computational turn” (Rogers 2019). How can we understand and map the socio-technical landscape that shapes the deployment of forms of extractive surveillance capitalism such as digital confinement and border control? How do monitored subjects experience these forms of digital enforcement through the images and other data extracted from their cell phones?

Our aim, in this article, is to propose an approach for studying how facial recognition technologies of confinement function and are experienced through an experimental collaborative visual methodology. Our methodological approach consists of a “walkthrough method” (Light et al. 2016) enacted within a collaborative reflexive ethnographic framework involving an anthropologist (Boe), a design scholar (Mainsah), a participant with personal experience of using the app SmartLINK® (Lorena) and her lawyer, occupying changing roles as researcher and research subject. Drawing on an interdisciplinary approach, our proposed methodology enables us to uncover different digital traces left by the deployment of SmartLINK®; analyse the production of and the imaginations of digital archives; and examine embodied experiences of extractive surveillance shaped by technological structures and infrastructures.

## 1. Methodological Concerns

Studying such enforcement technologies and how they operate in situated contexts of use constitutes a considerable methodological challenge. Software applications (apps) are a prevalent aspect of our digital everyday lives used across different domains from health, entertainment and finance to policing. Apps are relatively closed technical systems (Light et al. 2016) often created by commercial actors who want to protect trade secrets and design architecture. The source code of apps are often not shared publicly, meaning that researchers cannot easily examine their underlying technical structures. Thus, a major obstacle to studying technical systems such as algorithms and software applications is that, given the systems' obscure nature, researchers might not know the right questions to ask and where to begin with their inquiry (Hargittai et al. 2020).

When researching apps, unlocking the "black box" of back-end systems that shape their use requires some level of technological literacy. The app as a material environment opens itself up to a multiplicity of readings as to what is its "expected use" (Light et al. 2016). The readings might depend on the researcher's existing knowledge of app design. They might also depend on the researcher's knowledge of what genre the app belongs to, and her expectations about its conventions and norms. Thus, there is a need for methodological approaches that acknowledge the multiplicity of reading strategies for understanding the app's design and use among researchers, research subjects and other stakeholders.

Further, apps such as SmartLINK® come into use within wider ecologies and assemblages (Pearce et al. 2020) of users, platforms, infrastructures, software, devices, algorithms, data and regulatory regimes, among others. Their use is governed by numerous institutions, authorities and agencies within and across borders at local, regional, national, and international levels. This implies that researchers might find it difficult to define the boundaries of their empirical research field, and constantly need to reflect on the empirical object of their research (Marres 2017).

Finally, the material-technical aspects of these technologies are closely connected with the social and the corporeal. These technologies can routinise bodies, actions and identities through design choices, programming and connected infrastructures (Wood 2019). It is thus hard to separate the use and experience of these technologies from their design and representation. It is equally important to be attentive to the ways in which users can resist these arrangements through processes of appropriation in use.

### Developing an Approach

To address the challenges outlined above, we explore the use of a walkthrough method developed by Light and colleagues (2016), which we enact using an experimental collaborative visual methodological approach. The walkthrough method

involves engaging with an app's interface and related production information to understand its technical mechanisms and embedded cultural references, to appreciate how it shapes user experience. The researcher logs onto the app and mimics everyday use, observing and noting the app's screens, features and menu functions. The researcher contextualises this process by reviewing the representations and operational environment connected to the app.

The walkthrough method combines perspectives from STS (Latour 2005) and Cultural Studies. The principles of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) highlight the influence of non-human actors by looking at a technology's materiality and the affordances it extends, as well as the role the social and the material play in how users perceive their actions in relation to a technology. Equally, the walkthrough draws on methodological approaches from Cultural Studies used to understand material culture and the everyday practices of technology consumers. These approaches involve the study of technologies both as material artefacts and sites of cultural struggle through a combined focus on how a technology is represented, what social identities are associated with it, and how it is produced and consumed (Du Gay et al. 2013).

In our case, this method is enacted through two walkthrough iterations, one between an anthropologist and a research participant accompanied by her lawyer, and another between two researchers, the anthropologist and a design scholar. The enactment of the walkthrough method builds on interdisciplinary collaboration, whereby the anthropologist, Boe, draws on expertise built through extensive research on the anthropology of confinement and migration control, with particular focus on deportation, prisons, electronic monitoring and facial recognition. The design researcher, Mainsah, draws on his knowledge of digital media, technology design and collaborative research methods. The participant provides insight into a situated context of use, drawing on personal experience using the SmartLINK® app during her asylum process in the United States, and her lawyer ensures the best interest of her client, while taking part in the process, both by asking questions and contributing with her extensive knowledge of immigration law and practice.

The first walkthrough involves an exploration of the app's interface and experience of use in the context of an interview recorded on video by Boe, in which Lorena takes the anthropologist on a verbal and kinetic "guided tour" of the app, highlighting her experience of use, and the anthropologist, lawyer and participant together analyse the different features and digital traces generated through the process of use. The walkthrough was video recorded in Austin, Texas, in the fall of 2019 as part of the Borders without Fences and Confinement without Walls project, which involved collaborative ethnographic fieldwork and the making of a documentary film on "digital confinement". The project was led by Boe, and studied the spread and experiences of electronic monitoring, and how digital confinement compares with experiences of incarceration and detention behind physical walls and fences. It is based on fieldwork carried out in New York and

Texas among asylum seekers and migrants who are electronically monitored (Boe 2020b).

The second walkthrough took place between Boe and Mainsah. It consisted of looking at marketing materials produced by the owners of the app to understand how their discourses frame users and use. It involved engaging directly with the app's interface to examine its technical features and watching the video of the first walkthrough together. The first walkthrough was about engaging with the app by focusing mainly on experience of use in a situated context, through the eyes of Lorena. The second walkthrough aimed at adding new layers of insight by placing closer focus on the technical aspects of the app and the cultural meanings embedded in the app's interface and its marketing discourse, combining Boe's anthropological gaze with Mainsah's understanding of interaction design. The second walkthrough also provided the opportunity to review the first with fresh eyes and multiple perspectives. Knowledge generated through the walkthrough of the app's interface, and the participant's account of user experience is contextualised by analysis of online material produced by ICE and BI Group, to triangulate it with the experiences of the user.

We highlight the experimental and contingent way in which the enactment of the walkthrough method, that we describe, played out. An ideal research design for implementing such a fully collaborative visual methodology would have involved the researchers Boe and Mainsah, and research participant Lorena all being present in the same room sitting round a table and going through the SmartLINK® app and website, analysing together. However, COVID-19 pandemic social distancing restrictions and the closing of US borders for EU citizens made this impossible.

*Fig. 1: Image of the participant holding a smartphone with the screen showing the app. Credit: Carolina Sanchez Boe*



In the end, the walkthrough method that we present reflects a collaborative process of knowledge production (Ajjawi et al. 2020) spanning over two years and involving dialogue, reflection and sharing across different geographical and virtual locations, different languages, and different forms of experiential, scientific and technological expertise. It involves multi-sited ethnography (Austin, Texas; Paris, France; Oslo, Norway; online) and analysis (Marcus 1998) across time (2019–2021), and is carried out in three languages, Spanish, English and French. Our experience enables us to produce new layers of knowledge with video and audio archives, through iterative cycles of reflection and interdisciplinary collaborations.

## 2. The Walkthrough

The first enactment of the walkthrough method took place in the fall of 2019 between the anthropologist, Boe, and the participant, Lorena, with her lawyer present.

*Fig. 2: Screenshot of Lorena's fingers navigating through a menu function of the SmartLINK® app. Credit: Carolina Sanchez Boe*



Lorena logs on to the app, while describing how once a week she is required to take a photograph of herself in the app, and she has to have the phone on her and turned on at all times, with a full battery and the GPS on, so that ICE can follow her every step. She explains that she was asked to give her email address to the officer who had downloaded the app onto her phone. She also had to give contact information for six people living in the USA to ICE, spurring a reaction from both the lawyer and the anthropologist. Few asylum seekers know six persons in the USA, leading asylum seekers' friends and family to ask some of *their* friends to agree to give their contact information to the asylum seeker. Lorena adds that in case there are

issues with the phone, such as a disconnection with the GPS, a problem with the photo, or if the phone runs out of batteries, ICE can call the contact persons to ask where you are and if you have run away, which is disruptive for the contact person and stigmatising for the person being monitored. The lawyer comments that there is also an issue of whether the contact person's information is kept by the Department of Homeland Security and for how long.

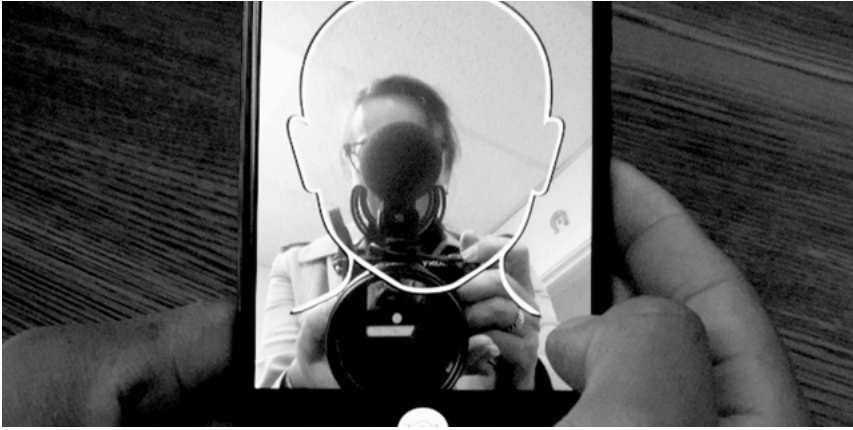
When Boe had interviewed Lorena's lawyer a few days earlier, she suggested setting up a meeting with Lorena, who also agreed to be filmed anonymously during the interview. The choice of filming is both a dissemination tool to understand and convey the reconfigurations of confinement and of internal borders through remote control and a method of inquiry in its own right. Audio-visual methods open up the possibility to create collaborative knowledge outputs and initiate exchanges with participants on how to raise awareness about their concerns, hereby acknowledging their role as full collaborators in the project, while establishing a "civil contract" with participants which, in this research, involved making sure to continuously protect their anonymity for obvious reasons (Azoulay 2008; Köhn 2016).

In the Summer of 2019, Boe had started directing a documentary on the use and experiences of electronic monitoring for internal border control, filmed with Austin-based videographer Jessie Rodriguez. The two developed a filmic approach which would anonymise the participants, while acknowledging the humanity of the person. This approach gives the viewer a sense of closeness to the subject and conveys sensorily how it feels to be forced to have a device on at all times, whether it is an electronic ankle monitor or an app on a smartphone.

In the process of filming Lorena on her own in the fall of 2019, Boe positioned the camera in a way that captured the app which Lorena was walking her through, but also tried to film her so that her hair, her skin, her clothes, her bag, would give the viewer a sense of the person, even though her identity could not be disclosed, striving to highlight her presence while protecting her against recognition and possible retaliation. While Boe's camera provides a GPS service and the possibility to connect it to the web, she has never made use of these possibilities, due to concerns about privacy and unwanted surveillance. Lorena chose "Lorena" as the name under which she would appear in the material. During this performative action that demonstrates the functionality of the app, Lorena and the anthropologist deliberately put the anthropologist's camera into the gaze of Lorena's phone camera, and into the frame where Lorena takes her selfie every week, while Lorena made sure to cover Boe's face.

*Fig. 3: Boe's camera captured in the facial recognition software of Lorena's phone.*

*Credit: Carolina Sanchez Boe*



### **A Multi-Layered Memory Process**

The walkthrough serves not only as a means of going through the app's interface but also as a form of visual elicitation (Bagnoli 2009; Pink et al. 2017; Rose 2001; Liebenberg 2018). A visual artefact, such as a smartphone app, can be mobilised to encourage memories and uncover layers of past experiences that might not be readily articulated through language alone (Sheridan et al. 2011).

As Lorena walks us through the app, it spurs a memory process, where the app serves as a memory object. She recalls, for instance, how she was initially relieved to get her ankle monitor off, until she was required to give ICE access to her email account, which connects to her social media, and install the app on her own smartphone, which holds photos of her family and friends along with other personal information and memories. As she opens the calendar function for appointment reminders, she remembers how the calendar failed to notify her of an appointment with a judge, which is confirmed by her lawyer. Lorena is also reminded of the first time she had to take a photo on her own, of how nervous she was, and remembers several instances where she was interrupted in her work by the app and had to hastily find a background which was sufficiently neutral for the requirements of the facial recognition software. She explains how her smartphone vibrates if she is not sufficiently quick at meeting the requirements, and how this can ultimately lead to one of her contacts being called on the phone to ask whether she has escaped. Going through the app enables Lorena to reconnect with embodied experiences such as the vibrations of the app, which in turn triggers memories of the monitor she once had on her ankle.

Fig. 4. Close-up image of the photo-taking function of the app with detailed instructions. Credit: Carolina Sanchez Boe



Lorena compares the three geolocalisation devices used for digital detention, saying how she first had an ankle monitor, then voice recognition, where she would get phone calls and have to state her name three times, which would be compared to her voiceprint, before getting the SmartLINK® app. The electronic ankle monitor would run out of battery often, especially in cold weather and a loud “Battery low!” would sound from her ankle. She recollects how the bulky plastic device is very “uncomfortable” (*incomodo*), as it blinks and is difficult to hide, causing a sense of criminalisation and isolation in public spaces, and difficulties accessing the labour market. Increasingly, these so-called “alternatives” cause stigmatisation within immigrant communities themselves, due to a growing awareness that people around the person who is monitored are also subject to surveillance (Boe 2020b). In this sense, digital detention, whether materialised in an ankle monitor, voice recognition or a biometric facial recognition app, is equally “uncomfortable” and “nasty” (*feo*), as it opens up the possibility to be even more intrusive than immigration detention.

Enacting the walkthrough with Lorena gives us insight into how surveillance technological systems produce what Ellis and colleagues refer to as “affective atmospheres” such as moods, emotions, feelings, thoughts, judgments, perceptions, sensations and all manner of social relations and associated practices (Ellis et al. 2013: 718). In this regard, they call for methods that are sensitive to the affective impacts that they produce in everyday embodied encounters.

## The Fear of Endangering Others

SmartLINK® is often referred to as “de-escalation”, a word that has connotations with the abolitionist word “decarceration”, which is very misleading. It is the alternative to the alternative and is often implemented along gendered lines, with concerns for the potential dangers of electronic ankle monitoring for pregnant women or for their foetus and future child, or to counter the bodily harm, such as chafing, sores and allergies generated by ankle monitors. To Lorena, SmartLINK®, however, is just as “incomodo” as the ankle monitor in the sense that she is never allowed to leave it, not even to go to the bathroom: “They told me that I had to have my phone on at all times, and that I shouldn’t have another phone or phone-line, only the one where the application is installed.” Lorena has also been told that she is not allowed to use another phone, which means that every time she calls someone or uses her phone to take photos or surf on the internet, she is compelled to do so with the phone that the app is installed on. This enhances the fear that the SmartLINK® app might be able to extract data from other services on her smartphone. Why else should she not be allowed to use another device? As with the ankle monitor, Lorena fears that she may endanger others through her cell phone.

This fear of endangering others has intensified since August 2019, when ICE conducted the largest immigration raid in recent US history, arresting 680 workers at seven poultry manufacturing plants, detaining and deporting hundreds of couples, leaving their children to come home from school to empty houses (Glenza 2019). In the weeks and months that followed, some were deported while others were released with ankle monitors (Fausset 2019). The Mississippi raids marked a new era of immigration enforcement, as a key part of the operation involved the use of data harvested from digital monitoring of asylum seekers for the preparation of the raids with the active participation of Silicon Valley tech giant Palantir (Mijente 2019), which is also involved in the management of refugee camps and in WHO food programs.

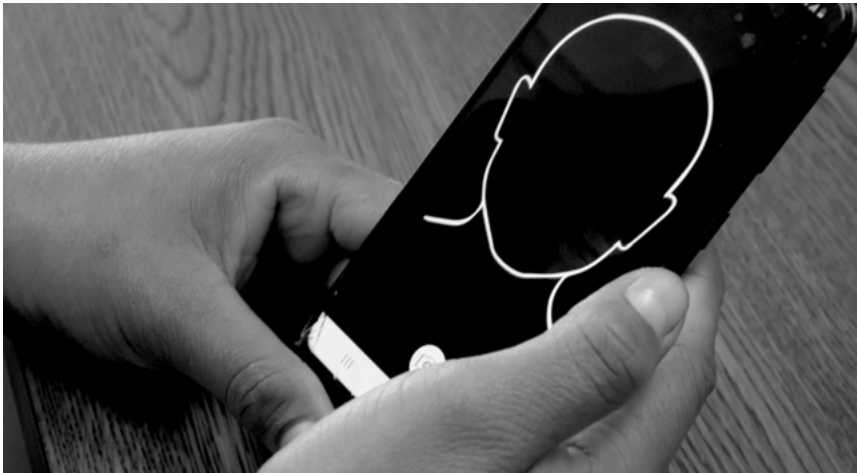
The affidavit of the arrest, which is available online (AP 2019), reveals how ICE had been using surveillance data extracted from the electronic monitors of three women from Guatemala, one of the women having been “de-escalated” to SmartLINK® in February 2019. The warrant teaches us about the working hours of the women, that they work shifts from 4.43 am–1.17 pm, and implicitly about their conditions of labour, which anthropologist Angela Stuessee (2016) has written about extensively. We also learn that one of the women had arrived in the US in 2014 and had been monitored for 5 years, which shows how indefinite electronic monitoring, as detention, can last for years, with an average time of 837.8 days according to a recent report from Just Futures Law and Mijente (2021).

Technologies for digital confinement have become an addition to ever-increasing detention numbers, spreading confinement into immigrant communities and homes indefinitely, and they open up opportunities to submit other immigrants and citizens to surveillance beyond the individual who is being

monitored. Other research participants that Boe has interviewed, who have experienced both detention and electronic monitoring, explain how the latter, despite the restrictions in their spatial mobility, gives a “taste of freedom”, which, they say, makes them comply more than they would in detention (Boe 2020b). Lorena is no different, in that she accepts her situation in the hope that she will obtain asylum and secure a safe future for her children, “It is for them that we are fighting, that I am fighting, for my children”. (*Es por ellos que nosotros luchamos, que lucho yo por mis hijos*).

One way of complying is through the forms of forced participation that are required for SmartLINK® to work. Barassi (2019: 414) argues that surveillance capitalism depends on “the systematic coercion of digital participation, which forces citizens to comply with data technologies”. She suggests how, in our technology-saturated cultures, citizens are constantly compelled to comply through the use of digital services or by providing personal data. Sometimes forced compliance happens in physical ways, such as through facial recognition technologies at airports. At other times this occurs simply because we live in data-driven environments that rely on automated decision making. Coercion of digital participation highlights “the violence of digital profiling and the fact that data traces *speaks for and about individual lives* in ways that go beyond individual choice or control” (Barassi 2019: 415, original emphasis).

Fig. 5: Interface of the facial recognition function. Credit: Carolina Sanchez Boe



Asylum seekers are required to take part in their own surveillance, to self-report, to keep the device that detains them charged at all times, and are hence to perform the function of being their own prison guard. This specific form of digital labour saves the companies that profit from digital detention expenses for labor, on top of the savings made on buildings, uniforms and food, when compared to detention behind physical, not digital walls. Furthermore, surveillance happens through

asylum seekers' own devices, with the use of their personal smartphones, rather than electronic ankle monitors that the company produces and manages. Hence, technical breakdowns of the device become the responsibility of the user and no longer of the company that monitors them.

In November 2021, two years after meeting Lorena initially, Boe met with her again in Austin, Texas. Her asylum case was still pending, and she was still being submitted to SmartLINK®. The lack of a definite end date gives immigration enforcement a particular temporal experience that differs fundamentally from most experiences of confinement such as prison, which, most often, has a set end date. Nicholas De Genova conceptualised “deportability” and “detainability”, that is, living with the constant risk of being deported or the risk of being detained (2002), which is what monitored research participants experience. Their only certainty is that if they get a negative answer to their asylum case, they will be deported, and they have no knowledge whether this life-altering event might happen today, tomorrow, in a month or in several years' time. Indefinite control and the inability to plan for the future seems, in some ways, even harsher when one is outside of detention centres, sharing an everyday life with friends, co-workers and family, than in detention, where everyone in one's close surroundings shares the same uncertainty (Boe 2020b).

### 3. Scrolling through Corporate Visions of Electronic Monitoring

The second enactment of the walkthrough took place several months after the encounter between Boe and the participant recorded on video, through a series of meetings between Boe and Mainsah in the spring and summer of 2021, during COVID-19 social distancing restrictions. We each sat in front of our computer screens in Paris, Aarhus and Oslo, connected through video chat.

Part of our walkthrough method involves examining what Light and colleagues (Light et al. 2016) describe as the environment of expected use, the socio-economic and cultural context of the app. This means paying attention to how the producer describes the app's vision, imagines the user and presents scenarios of use. It also involves looking at how the producer conveys and conceives of the functions that the app provides and supports. This component of the walkthrough involved the two researchers going through product information about the app on the website, on Google Play and Apple Store, as well as material provided by ICE. So, what do we learn about SmartLINK® from the marketing material on BI Incorporated's website?<sup>2</sup>

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2 <https://www.bi.com>.

We discover that we can also access information on SmartLINK® provided by Google Play and Apple Store,<sup>3</sup> which feature screenshots of the interface and mostly negative user reviews in English and Spanish. We notice a “disclaimer” that warns users that “Continued use of GPS running in the background can dramatically decrease battery life”, in spite of the fact that it is a requirement for users of SmartLINK® to have their GPS turned on at all times.

As we scroll through the website and product catalogue, we learn from the “About Us”<sup>4</sup> section of the website that: “Our products include a wide range of electronic monitoring systems, enabling agencies to apply the least restrictive or appropriate option to support compliance to conditions of release. By releasing individuals to community supervision with the support of these innovative tools, they are able to live (*sic*) in the community, support themselves and their families, and supervising officers understand better how a person is doing in the community.”

Under the headline “Strengthening Communities Through Innovation”, the photos that support this claim to electronic monitoring being the “least restrictive” show families happily enjoying leisure time, a father and son with a baseball and glove, a little girl on a playground with her father. Through words and photos, the cultural representation of the user is that of the male under criminal justice supervision, and female asylum seekers such as Lorena, or the women whose surveillance led to the Mississippi raids are not represented, as the accent is put on the companies’ activities in criminal justice enforcement. The notion that users may not comply but may need enforced surveillance is present, with the product sheet for SmartLINK® highlighting features such as “Eliminates the risk of GPS spoofing”<sup>5</sup>. We could read this as a potential for resistance among the monitored; however, we know from Lorena’s interview and Boe’s wider research project that asylum seekers go to great lengths to comply with the requirements in order to get their day in court and obtain asylum.

We notice how, in spite of the omnipresence of data-driven technological solutions and promises of risk assessment, issues such as privacy, data generation, collection and storage are not mentioned. What kind of personal data is collected? What kind of personal consent is given? What data is produced?

Another issue not mentioned is the profit-driven motives of the company, which can be found in other literature produced by the company to its shareholders. Gilman and Romero quote a 2017 report from GEO, BI Group’s parent company, which stated that new ICE contracts for electronic monitoring had increased revenues by 33% and constituted “milestones that have paved the way for

3 <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/bi-smartlink/id1068021794>. <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.biinc.mobile.client&hl=en&gl=US&showAllReviews=true>. <https://appadvice.com/app/bi-smartlink/1068021794>.

4 <https://bi.com/about-us/>.

5 <https://bi.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/SmartLINK-factsheet.pdf>.

continued positive momentum for our company” (Gilman/Romero 2018). What we do learn is that SmartLINK® is Android & IOS compatible, and can be downloaded through Google Play or Apple Store, and that BI Incorporated has three trusted partners in T Mobile, Verizon and Google.<sup>6</sup> Hence, implicitly, the company website shows us how telecom and internet companies, which developed in other fields, are now getting involved in criminal justice and border enforcement, generating considerable profit for these companies, too.

Under the heading “Made in the USA”, the “About Us” section further insists on the benefits that the company presents for the private work market, as it states that “BI proudly designs, engineers, and manufactures 200,000+ GPS tracking, alcohol detection, and RF monitoring units annually in Colorado”. The company prides itself in creating jobs in the private sector, while implicitly stressing that it saves man-hours in the public sector. According to the product catalogue, “alternatives” to detention such as SmartLINK® and the “biometric check-ins” and “remote case-management” through BI’s TotalAccess® “reduces time spent on administrative work”.<sup>7</sup> Finally, we know from previous research that the monitored are no longer spending time in offices, queuing or waiting, which offered potentials for sociability with others in similar situations. In this sense, the “alternatives” produce a sense of atomisation, with individuals getting disconnected from others who share the same experiences (Boe 2020b). Hence, rather than “strengthening communities”, as the marketing material suggests, SmartLINK®, like other digital alternatives to detention, resonates with other infrastructures that make the presence of detention and internal borders of the nation-state invisible, while rendering border violence hyper-visible at sites located at the national borders, as shown by anthropologist Nicholas de Genova (2013).

## Exploring the Interface

Gaining an overview of the technical features of the app is a central component of the selected method. In the second walkthrough, besides examining marketing material, another key task for Boe and Mainsah involved studying the features of the app and engaging with the app’s interface, examining the screens, exploring menus and testing buttons. This implies experiencing how to download the app, log in and out, register and set up an account. For Boe, this was a repeat with Mainsah of the process previously carried out with Lorena.

We download the app onto our phones and start the walk through. However, doing all this as an outside user in the case of the SmartLINK® app is not possible because of institutional restrictions. When you download SmartLINK® without being on probation or enrolled in the ISAP program, you cannot get beyond the login. There are other secondary sources that give an idea of the app’s interface.

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6 <https://bi.com/about-us/>.

7 <https://bi.com/mobile-monitoring/>.

Representations of the app on the company's website and on Google Play offer a partial preview of the interface with four screenshots showing the login page and key menu functions. The menu functions, which are featured on the app store screenshots of the interface, are the "check in" buttons, where you are asked to take a picture of yourself that will be compared with your enrolment picture to verify your identity, and the calendar function for appointment reminders. Together with the content of the website, the menu items featured on the app store serve as a way of conveying the app owner's preferred user practices and expectations of use. However, logging into the app as researchers to view its interface provides very little information when compared to reviewing the video and photographic archive produced in 2019, with Lorena and her lawyer.

### Multiple Gazes

Given the status of apps as relatively closed technical systems that are open to multiple cultural readings, enacting the walkthrough involved looking in from multiple perspectives and different subjective positions. Watching the video together enabled us to notice different types of details and develop new reflections. For example, we noticed that Lorena writes her appointment down on a sticky note placed on her ISAP photo ID card, which is issued to all persons released from detention under the ATD program. We wonder why she chooses to note an appointment manually rather than open her app to see when she has an appointment.

We also read a transcript of the interview translated from Spanish to English (Mainsah does not speak Spanish). In itself, the process of translation is a method that generates knowledge, as we translate both the language and the meaning behind what is said. "*Incomodo*" can be translated to "uncomfortable", "embarrassing" or "cumbersome", while "*feo*" can be translated to "foul", "awful" or "nasty".

For the anthropologist, watching the footage again in 2021 with her colleague became a very different experience from interviewing and filming itself. During this collaborative process of watching, remembering and reflecting, the video footage served as a memory object in its own right, enabling the creation of new layers of knowledge. This is akin to Lincoln and Robards' experience of "scrolling back" and walking through the timeline of Facebook together, creating a memory process that benefits from different kinds of situated knowledge and different gazes (Haraway 1988; Robards/Lincoln 2017). The design researcher has a complementary reading of the app than the anthropologist, drawing on competences such as technical knowledge of apps, how facial recognition software works, and an eye for the cultural representations embedded within the interface.

## Conclusion

The digital detention technology landscape comprises a complex assemblage of wearable devices, identification cards, app stores, physical locations and apps that collect information about the users, all of which pose questions about privacy and consent. The involuntary wearing of the devices has its own types of affective, embodied consequences. What we suggest is that these methods provide a good foundation for generating further research data for understanding how monitored subjects experience these forms of digital enforcement, and how they imagine that the images and other data extracted from their cell phones can be used against them, their families, their colleagues, employers or communities.

The walkthrough shows major differences between the discourse of the company's marketing material and the experiences of users who are forcibly submitted to new forms of surveillance capitalism. In this article, we have addressed some of the methodological challenges we encounter when studying surveillance technologies deployed on vulnerable populations. Among the difficulties for researchers, there is the issue of understanding assemblages of enforcement tech, how the device connects to other apps, devices and legal regimes. This is a cross-disciplinary field that requires different forms of expertise and types of knowledge. Another difficulty is the question of getting access to this tech, which, in turn, poses the challenge to anonymise research participants who are being monitored at all times.

There are major ethical issues related to studying technologies with users who are detained through their smartphone. In the article, we call for participatory alliances and relational ethics when examining regimes of digital confinement. During the process, Lorena was accompanied by her lawyer, who works in the best interest of her client. Collaboration with lawyers is a necessity in order to protect our research collaborators when examining enforcement technologies in digital carceral contexts, which imply engaging with participants in vulnerable situations. Besides the safety of participants, our inquiry generated discussions among us relating to researcher safety, given the increased surveillance and criminalisation of immigrant rights activists (Boe 2020b). Could there be consequences for non-US citizens carrying out critical research on border enforcement, who at the same time depend on border agencies to obtain a visa to enter the USA? We need to have ongoing discussions about the possible implications of putting others and ourselves in danger, and here, collaborative research is a necessity.

Such collaborative endeavours, we argue, are also necessary when we draw from interdisciplinary methods and theories, and collaborate with the monitored to understand the embodied experiences of digital confinement. By creating alliances between different approaches and disciplines, and with the people who are experiencing enforcement tech or are witnesses to it in their daily practice, we can contribute to rendering invisibilised forms of violence against minorities visible, along with new forms of punitive and profit-driven surveillance capitalism.

Deploying the walkthrough method with people subjected to electronic monitoring opens the possibility of witnessing the manifestation of a carceral continuum, or the notion that bodies are controlled and disciplined beyond prison walls through forms of governmentality that are similar to the ones deployed in carceral institutions (Foucault 1995: 303). In this case, technologies from the criminal justice system are being implemented in immigrant communities, expanding detention and surveillance beyond the individual, monitored person to their co-workers, neighbours and friends. Just as electronic monitoring for criminal justice purposes expanded carceral spaces into the city, digital ‘alternatives’ create immigration detention in communities, multiplying internal borders within urban and rural spaces. The Mississippi raids showed how the surveillance of three women, whose data had been stored, was analysed and used months later for the arrest of several hundred undocumented workers by ICE. So-called “alternatives” to detention open new possibilities for the retroactive surveillance of hundreds of persons through the devices of a few individuals. We are now moving into a new era when immigration control and for-profit extraction of migrants’ time and mobility is no longer carried out only by actors from the for-profit prison industrial complex, but increasingly so by tech companies that are investing in new data markets.

While digital alternatives are highly intrusive to users and dangerous for their communities, some immigration advocates still perceive the deployment of digital tools as a welcome substitute for immigration detention, also during the various campaigns to release detainees during the pandemic that started in early 2020. No human rights defenders would ever support opening more prisons or more immigration detention facilities, but many still perceive electronic monitoring as a “more humane” alternative to the terrible conditions of detention in the USA. This is *not* an alternative to detention; it *is* detention in another form. Digital confinement, whether through ankle monitors or through a smartphone, causes considerable stress for their involuntary wearers and puts whole communities in danger through the presence of a single person. To Lorena as to others, facial recognition is worse than detention and electronic ankle monitors, as it is an even more invasive form of confinement.

These developments within border enforcement are not only important for immigrants, their support networks or the US taxpayers who finance for-profit detention, but are of relevance to us all, also the seemingly most protected citizens. We may think twice about the corporate interests, privacy concerns and user consequences of the deployment of similar technologies to SmartLINK® during the pandemic, to subject the sick or the quarantined to surveillance, or to track the interactions between contaminated and healthy citizens. Research shows how identification and tracking and confinement technologies are commonly tested with experiments on the most vulnerable and marginalised first, often non-citizens, before being generalised to the population (Noiriel 1988), especially in times of crisis.

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