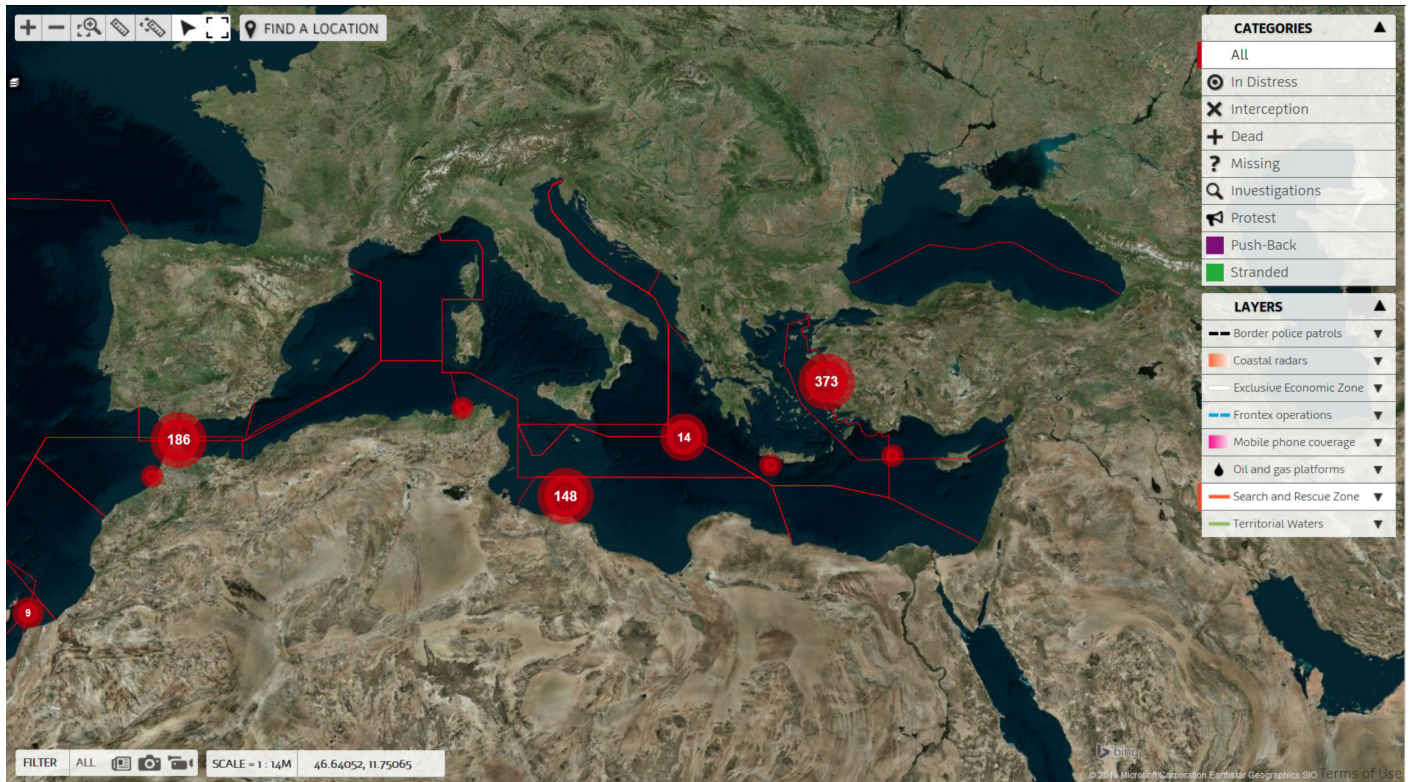


Mapping Safe Passages

Real-Time Interventions at the Maritime Borders of Europe



Click to zoom the map

During the long summer of migration in 2015, the importance of digital tools for transnational movements of people has been widely acknowledged. While states have been using geographical information and maps to control movements of people across space for a long time, transnational migrants and support network have found creative ways of using online mapping platforms to organise their journey and to evade state practices of control and immobilisation.

Stephan Liebscher (SL) spoke with Ina Fischer¹ (IF), member of the Alarmphone, about the use of the online mapping crowdmap watchthemed.net to ensure safe trips for people crossing the Mediterranean Sea and enable their participation in decision-making.

SL: Why did the Alarmphone start its work and what are the aims behind it?

IF: The idea for the project emerged in 2013, after two boats in emergency situations in the Central Mediterranean Sea were not assisted: On 3 October 2013, 366 people drowned close to the island of Lampedusa, yet another catastrophe that could have easily been prevented by means of providing adequate rescue at sea. Only a few days later, again more than 250 people drowned after they had tried to call for help for hours – in vain: Based on accounts of survivors, assistance was knowingly withheld despite numerous SOS calls. The situation of distress and non-assistance was reconstructed in detail on the online monitoring platform watchthemed.net. These two cases were a key moment in raising various questions: What would have happened if these people in distress, being

systematically ignored by coast guards, had had the option to call an independent phone hotline? Wouldn't it be possible to amplify distress calls through immediate appeals to the public? In October 2014, the Alarmphone started its work: a telephone hotline – working 24 hours – for people in distress at sea, informing coast guards and pressuring rescue authorities in real time via public media and politicians, if necessary. Furthermore, with this work we emphasise migrants' perspectives and build a counter-narrative: We bear witness to the movement of migration from below.

SL: Can you describe one typical case?

IF: The conditions differ a lot across the different regions of the Mediterranean. The distance from Turkey to Greece, for example, is just a few kilometres. Travellers in the zodiacs crossing the Aegean are usually well equipped with smartphones. First, we find out about their problem: Sometimes the engine is not working and we can give advice. If people are stranded on an uninhabited island or are in immediate distress, we ask them to send us their current GPS-position via WhatsApp.

The distance to Europe in the Central Mediterranean Sea, however, is very far. For the trip from Libya or Tunisia, people need satellite phones to call us and to figure out their GPS position. Usually there is one phone per boat carrying an average of 150 or more people. The people who try to reach Europe via Morocco to Spain – mostly from sub-Saharan Africa – need to pool money to buy small zodiacs – often even without engine. Crossing the Strait of Gibraltar in a boat with 10 people is a perilous venture!

The people mostly call us on cheap mobiles. Without their GPS position, their lives depend on their exact information about the time and place of their departure. When we are alerted by friends or family members, we ask for a direct contact to the boat. We immediately call the passengers to ask them about their current situation: How many people, women or children are on the boat? Are there any sick people?

SL: How do you use maps to handle these emergency situations?

IF: We insert the GPS position of a boat into the map-application on watchthemed.net – a sister project – to figure out in real time which national coast guard is in charge of the rescue, as it shows the so-called official Search and Rescue Zones and other additional layers. The Alarmphone team then forwards all relevant information to the responsible European coast guard. By using the mapping platform, we can also identify if a boat is threatened by an illegal push-back or pull-back by the coastguards. Live tracking maps like vesselfinder.com or marinetraffic.com indicate if civilian rescue vessels or cargo vessels are nearby. Other important actors – the military vessels of NATO, Frontex or missions such as EUNAFVOR MED – are not displayed as they can turn off their transmitter. We additionally use wind maps and weather forecasts to learn about potential current risks at sea. In the aftermath, we publish relevant cases on the platform watchthemed.net.

SL: You mentioned the crowdmapping platform watchthemed.net. Can you tell us the story behind it?

IF: watchthemed.net originates from a research project called Forensic Oceanography.² It was launched in 2011 to support a coalition of NGOs demanding accountability for the deaths of migrants in the Central Mediterranean Sea while that region was being tightly monitored by the NATO-led coalition intervening in Libya. The efforts were focused on what is now known as the first “left-to-die-boat” case, in which 63 migrants lost their lives while drifting for 14 days within the NATO maritime surveillance area (see illustration below). For the first time, surveillance technologies were used to reconstruct a detailed documentation: It could be demonstrated with precision how

different actors operating in the Central Mediterranean Sea were using the complex and overlapping jurisdictions at sea to evade their responsibility of rescuing people in distress. The report formed the basis for a number of ongoing legal petitions filed against NATO member states. The Forensic Oceanography project was further developed into the monitoring platform Watch The Med. This public platform was launched in 2012 and lets anyone contribute to the map by submitting their own reports of violations of migrants' rights at sea. In the Alarmphone, we build on their experience and use the mapping platform for our real-time interventions.

SL: The Alarmphone describes itself as an "alternative alarm-phone" for people in distress in the Mediterranean Sea. What is the political dimension of your work?

IF: All our work is based on the conviction that migration is not a crime, and that state borders serve to prevent people from their right to move around freely. The European Union's alleged fight against smugglers and deaths at sea first of all serves their interest to fight migration to Europe. We do not just answer emergency calls and forward them to the coast guards but also give advice to improve the situation of the boat people in emergency situations. We inform about safety at sea in different languages via social media, we provide introductions in the use of the GPS function of phones or how to act in cases of hypothermia. As soon as we know the position of a boat, we inform the travellers in which SAR zone they are located and which coast guard will probably rescue them. While in the Western Mediterranean the coast guards of Spain and Morocco cooperate closely, competences of the SAR actors in the Aegean Sea are divided quite clearly. We inform the boats about the consequences of an interception by coast guards from Turkey or Morocco: People will be brought back to their countries of departure. As we know that people will face the hell of deportation camps in Libya, we would never alert Libyan authorities unless the boat people ask us to do so. If they wish to continue their journey, we wait before calling the responsible authorities.

SL: Boat people send you their GPS locations, and you forward them to state authorities to raise alarm. Where does the Alarmphone come in?

IF: The Alarmphone acts as a partial intermediary between boat people and state authorities, i.e. the coast guards in the different regions. As we sometimes experience that authorities listen more carefully to us than to boat people, this means giving the latter a voice or amplifying it. We are the only actor who not only calls the boat people back to ask for their current situation on board but also to calm them down in case of panic. We try to stay in touch with the boats during the rescue operation and even after it has ended. To be in direct communication enables us to learn about sudden changes on the boat: On 15 April 2017, for example, we were informed about a boat in distress in the Central Mediterranean. We spoke to the boat people over a period of more than 12 hours, before we lost contact. The engine did not work and water was entering the boat. We passed on their demands for rescue and updated their GPS positions to the responsible authorities and supported them throughout this difficult time. As weather conditions were fine, the simultaneous departure of dozens of boats from the Libyan coasts were quite frequent those days, while only one Frontex vessel was on duty. That Easter weekend, 8,360 people were rescued mainly by civil society rescue organisations. We scandalised the EU's responsibility in the construction of this deadly void at sea via social media – Facebook and Twitter –, press releases and in cooperation with the involved NGO-vessels. We always inform institutions like UNHCR by default about all of our cases, and we contact journalists and organisations in the relevant regions. We are careful in our decision whether to raise public alarm, though. Beforehand, we try our best to urge the responsible authorities to act by calling them repeatedly and by publishing current emergency cases via social media.

SL: How do you maintain a critical perspective towards state practices in the Mediterranean in the long run?

IF: Our overall aim is to abolish (national) borders and migration control. We do not consider ourselves an additional service provider to the coast guards but rather supporters of people who claim their right to freedom of movement. We publish critical statements about the current situation in the Mediterranean and new developments on a regular basis. We scandalise the measures of the European Union and Frontex to build and extend the fortress of Europe while claiming to fight smugglers and human trafficking. We are convinced that only open borders will put an end to the smuggling business and all the calculated deaths at sea, as they depend on borders and illegalised migration. In our work, we experience every day how closely the worsening of the conditions of flight is related to each time the migration regime gets tighter. However, we are happy about every boat that reaches its intended destination, although we are aware that crossing the Mediterranean Sea is only one small step towards a safe life in dignity.

SL: Maps are often criticised as always transmitting some political perspective. Why is it important for you to appropriate official maps and conventions, and how do they serve your goals?

IF: Official conventions define national borders and responsibilities. They frame the work of the actors, like coast guards and SAR vessels, as well as our own work. We fight for open borders and freedom of movement for all. In order to support people in distress, knowledge about a boat's current position in relation to borderlines and rescue zones is crucial. This way, we can assess whether human rights were violated by illegal state activities. The map of watchthemed.net is special: It not only displays borders defined by states, but also places of catastrophes and fatalities. If you look at the map, you see many large red spots. The numbers inside indicate the amount of reports in a specific region, so you can immediately detect the deadliest areas and migration routes of the Mediterranean.

SL: There are many discussions centering around participation and democratic decision-making in crowd-maps. How do boat people participate in the Alarmphone?

IF: The Alarmphone network consists of about 150 activists around the Mediterranean Sea who regularly do telephone shifts and/or contribute to the project otherwise. Some of our members have made the experience of crossing the Sea by boat themselves. Now they are doing shifts to support other people's crossings or contribute otherwise. Some of us live in Morocco or Tunisia, which enables these members to do follow-ups of cases – another important part of our work. For example, if people are sent back illegally and arrested, they establish contact with the arrested or their friends and families in order to find out what happened. Some migrants finally decide to come to Europe, where we can welcome them. The Alarmphone also offers advice regarding safety at sea via different kinds of social media in many languages. All our work is based strongly on the experiences of people who were boat people at a particular moment of their lives.

SL: Thank you for the conversation.

IF: Thank you.

Closing Remarks: Rethinking Cartographic Critique

The Alarmphone is a particularly interesting example, as its everyday work revolves around the appropriation of

diverse maps, digital tools and cartographic conventions. When receiving an emergency call, this socio-material infrastructure allows the Alarmphone teams to predict the outcome of actions they may take. To jointly make decisions, the Alarmphone and the boat people may establish and maintain communication in a way that is “imperceptible” (Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 214) to coast guards and border patrols. Communicating and mapping in real time thus become acts of subversion when they make it possible to identify human rights abuses and small holes in the European border regime apparatus and turn them into an immediate improvement of the boat peoples’ situation.

The example of the Alarmphone offers new possibilities of describing cartographic critique. Moments of subversion are not to be found in reinterpretations of cartographic conventions; rather, they can be identified in the appropriation of maps and conventions and their combination with other digital tools. Within these complex assemblages, maps become a kind of organising tool for the flow of data, bodies and boats and they help to identify the necessary means and moments of subversive interventions (Cobarrubias & Pickles, 2009). Instead of a negative critique, these everyday cartographies positively enable alternative geographical imaginations. Instead of rejecting cartographic norms, the Alarmphone activists use digital mapping platforms and their underlying essentialisms to gain temporary authorship over the territorial borders of Europe.

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Illustrations

Map right column: Screenshot of watchthemed.net with red dots showing the number of cases in each region and with red-lined search and rescue zones.

Photograph ‘Watchthemed team working with the platform’ by Leona Goldstein: Two Alarmphone members during shift work.

Graphics ‘Localizing a boat I’ and ‘Localizing a boat II’ localizing a boat by Alarmphone: A boat that has been localised and contextualised via the mapping platform watchthemed.net within international territorial demarcations.

Footnotes

1. The name has been changed so that Ina can speak more openly about her experiences with the Alarmphone,

and to prevent possible criminalisation.

2. forensic-architecture.org/forensic-oceanography-addendum-report-left-die-boat/