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MEDIA SHIFT Idea Lab

REINVENTING COMMUNITY NEWS FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

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When Mobile Media Becomes Political



Paul Lamb

7:03 PM | [BIO](#) | [COMMENTS: 2](#)

About

Idea Lab is a group blog by innovators who are reinventing community news for the Digital Age.

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What's this?

[MobileActive.org](#) posted an interesting [interview](#) with "Artist" Ricardo Dominguez, who is working on a locative media project designed to assist immigrants crossing the border to the U.S. from Mexico. His work-in-progress concept, called the Transborder Immigrant Tool, leverages GPS enabled cell phones to aid in the safe passage of desert border crossers.

"The device seeks to reduce the number of deaths along the border by helping immigrants locate resources such as water caches and safety beacons."

Not only is the tool seemingly well designed (read below) for the population it targets, but it seems relevant for remote and wilderness emergency situations more broadly. If you have seen the movie or read the book [Into the Wild](#), you know what I mean.

But the fact that this project is designed to assist illegals specifically, even though it is clearly a practical attempt to save lives, puts it directly in the cross hairs of the national debate on immigration and immigration reform. Groups like the [Minutemen](#) will no doubt have lots to say about it...and they ain't gonna be happy!

All politics aside, check out some of the design details...

_"The tool is built on a Motorola i455 phone, which offers several advantages. Not only is the phone cheap -- about \$40, according to Ricardo -- but no service is required for GPS functionality. "What we needed was a really inexpensive telephone, one that we could crack the GPS system, and one that would accept new algorithms."

The team took language into account when designing the application. "We needed to design the interface in a way that would be somewhat universal in terms of the community that would be crossing the border," he said. Many of the migrants are from indigenous communities, and wouldn't necessarily speak Spanish. The end result was a navigation system that looks like a compass. The phone also vibrates in response to certain landmarks, like water or a highway. The vibrations allow the user to concentrate on the surrounding environment instead of constantly looking at the screen of the phone."

Mr. Dominguez also has a distinct (and frankly unusual) artistic vision for the project...

"We were trying to think of many layers of communication -- iconic, sound, vibratory," he said. Additionally, the program helps the user not only avoid getting lost, but helps him or her find a more aesthetic route.

Technology, art, and politics are all present in this one!

The tool is scheduled to be ready for use by the end of next year.

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Comments

I suppose if they are able to perfect this instrument so that illegals can call for help when they are stranded in the desert, the number they call will be our border patrol.

Perhaps the U.S. should do as they do in war-torn countries and drop leaflets on the Mexican side of the border cautioning that those who breach the border illegally do so at their own peril.

It is appalling that Mexico is not cooperating to quell this invasion that is taking the lives of their citizens.

If the Mexican people who are marching in U.S. streets in an effort to change our government spent the same energy in their own country they could probably bring about changes that would allow them to survive in their motherland.

By JanetP 6:47PM on 24 Nov 07

I'll get one, so I'll be able to find my way way into Mexico. ;-)

The United States faces economic crisis.

One of the earliest, most visible reactions to that has been the scapegoating and violent targeting of people from places in which our government has caused economic crisis.

I won't be fleeing for Mexico; I'm a stay and fight kind of person, and I want the U.S. to lead in developing a fair, functioning society— or at least do the least possible damage on its way down. One thing, though, is clear:

We are going to want to learn both from people who have [been through their own superpower meltdown](#) and, even more so, people who have dealt with economic disaster so long that [they've started to do something about it](#).

By Benjamin Melançon 10:53AM on 25 Nov 07

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