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Understanding the Preconditions of Information Infrastructure: A Study of the EU Settlement Scheme's Contribution to the Digitalization of the British Immigration System

Abstract

This paper examines the introduction of an example of digital border control, the EU Settlement scheme (EUSS). Implemented by the UK Home Office as a response to Brexit, it offers an immigration status to EU nationals living in the UK post-Brexit, and a new approach to online immigration status verification. This approach is the use of a centralized online system, rather than a physical document, for immigration checks by landlords, employers, government agencies, and border guards.

The EUSS has been discussed as contributing to increasing policing of migrants in the UK, and the lack of a physical document is discussed as part of the Home Office's attempts to crack down on identity fraud and encumber migrants' access to social services. Such a framing aligns with the work of scholars in the field of critical security studies who chart states' increasing restrictions of human mobility. However, beyond simply tightening restrictions on over migrants, the EUSS is novel for its development of capacity for other border control projects. The EUSS' exclusive employment of online immigration requires changes to practices of status checkers, some of which involve the development of supporting IT beyond the scheme itself. Furthermore, the EUSS is only the first online-only immigration status, with its approach being applied to other visas as well.

Based on the first year of my PhD research and building on STS scholarship that investigates the practices involved in border control technologies, this paper conceptualizes the EUSS as a proto-infrastructure: an early step toward building an information infrastructure for online immigration status verification. While scholars have focused on processes of infrastructuring in border control, I contribute an empirical picture of the early-stage dynamics which precede the creation of an infrastructure proper.

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