

## Case 9 There is an App for THAT!

Microsoft has recently filed a patent for a navigation application (app), which allows pedestrians to choose the safest walking route by combining GPS technology with “information from maps, weather reports, crime statistics and demographics.”<sup>1</sup> Microsoft has not yet released the app, but the product has already stirred controversy among scholars, technology users, business owners and the NAACP, earning the infamous nickname “avoid-ghetto app.” Unlike other commonly used navigation programs, such as Google Maps, which simply give users the shortest distance between two locations, Microsoft’s app has the ability to guide pedestrians away from neighborhoods that it deems unsafe. As explained in the patent application, pedestrians using this app are routed “through neighborhoods with violent crime statistics below a certain threshold.”<sup>2</sup> Some technology experts have praised the app for being the next logical step in intelligent navigation technology. If people want to avoid dangerous places, so the argument goes, this technology is merely a tool that can help them arrive at their destination safely.

While users’ desire for safety is understandable, some scholars have argued that this new technology is hardly innocuous. According to Dr. Sarah Chinn, an expert in racism and technology, the app in question simply reinforces stereotypes about non-whites and perpetuates the faulty assumption “that criminality and being poor and not white go hand in hand..., when [i]n reality, FBI crime statistics for 2010 show that whites were arrested more often for violent crimes that year than any other race.” The president of Dallas’ NAACP echoed Chinn’s assessment of the new app when she condemned Microsoft for developing a product that reinforces racist stereotypes. Furthermore, business owners have worried about the economic consequences of developing a product that can potentially drive away customers. A downtown Dallas business owner expressed his dismay when he said that Microsoft’s app would be devastating, “[e]specially in the area of tourism.”<sup>3</sup>

Because the app has not been released yet, it is unclear whether it will systematically route pedestrians away from non-white and low-income neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the controversy sparked by Microsoft’s product has created a fruitful discussion about the social implications of using technology to mediate our interaction with our environment. As Jim Thatcher, a scholar of geospatial geography, has argued, creators of navigation technologies utilize “private data and algorithms, and [are] able to select what areas of the environment are rendered visible and invisible.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, as this technology becomes increasingly common, we must “ask what they preclude from consideration.”

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1 Danielle Cadet, “Microsoft ‘Avoid Ghetto’ App Sparks Controversy.” *The Huffington Post*. Jan. 19, 2012. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/19/microsoft-avoid-ghetto-ap\\_n\\_1217398.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/19/microsoft-avoid-ghetto-ap_n_1217398.html).

2 Allison Keyes. “This App was Made of Walking – But is it Racist?” *NPR.org*. Jan. 25, 2012. <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/25/145337346/this-app-was-made-for-walking-but-is-it-racist>.

3 Sharrie Williams, “App That Would Guide Users Away From High-Crime Areas Proves Controversial,” *CBSDFW.com*, Jan. 17, 2012. <http://dfw.cbslocal.com/2012/01/17/app-that-would-guide-users-away-from-high-crime-areas-proves-controversial/>.

4 Jim Thatcher (Clark University), “Can we get there from here? Teleological Red-Lining and Avoiding the Ghetto.” *Antipode Foundation*, March 14, 2012. <http://antipodefoundation.org/2012/03/14/can-we-get-there-from-here-teleological-red-lining-and-avoiding-the-ghetto/>.