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Ian Kalman

# "Don't Blame Me, It's Just the Computer Telling Me To Do This": computer attribution and the discretionary authority of Canada Border Services Agency officers

# "Don't Blame Me, It's Just the Computer Telling Me To Do This": computer attribution and the discretionary authority of Canada Border Services Agency officers[1]

*Ian Kalman*[2]

"Computer says no"
*– Catchphrase of a recurring character on TV Show, Little Britain*

## Abstract

In this paper, I demonstrate some of the ways in which computer technologies have changed how border officers and travelers in North America interact. Whereas historically, discretionary activities have been understood by officers largely in the context of "non-invocation" (LaFave 2006) of their legal authority, computers made it increasingly difficult for officers to choose when not to invoke the law. Attributing demands to a computer has opened a new space for officers to view themselves as discretionary, as they are now choosing the manner in which they justify their practices to a traveler. Such attributions can help them 'save face' and develop or maintain rapport with travelers, potentially rendering them more compliant in that exchange and future exchanges. Face work (Goffman 1967) is an essential, albeit under-examined facet of border work. As much as computers have contributed to a feeling of distance between travelers and border operations, they have also enabled new possibilities for closeness. Here, I supplement the limited literature on the ways in which Canadian border work has changed in recent decades by offering ethnographic illustrations of officers' responses to the introduction of computer-generated referrals to their work and some impacts of these referrals on relationships with traveling publics.

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[2] Ian Kalman is an associate of the Department 'Law & Anthropology' at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany. He is also a doctoral candidate at the Department of Anthropology, McGill University, Montreal, Canada, e-mail: ian.kalman@mail.mcgill.ca.

**Introduction**

Why would a Canadian border officer 'blame the computer?' Under what circumstances, would doing so be possible, and a good idea? Why would that officer not simply demand compliance? How is blaming the computer the consequence of a loss of discretionary authority? How can it be understood as a form of discretion in itself? This paper examines these questions in the context of operations at the Cornwall Port of Entry in Eastern Ontario, Canada. I argue that attributing a referral to the agency of 'the computer' rather than an officer represents an effort at what Erving Goffman (1967) termed "face work", the maintenance of positive and consistent self-image in an interpersonal exchange.

Such attributions emerged in the aftermath of what Karine Côté-Boucher (2015) has referred to as "the paradox of discretion" in Canadian border enforcement. Since the 1990s, Canadian border officers' powers have expanded, while their agency in the exercise of those powers has declined. Today, officers can carry guns, make arrests, and perform actions that had previously only been reserved for police. Nevertheless, they also have to respond to the demands of a wide variety of agencies and technologies in the exercise of those powers. They have to do what the computer tells them, and if they do not, the computers will log it, and they may face rebuke, lose their jobs, or even be arrested.

These changes were widely understood as a loss of discretion amongst Canada Border Services officers. Especially once one recognises that officers frequently viewed discretion not in terms of their capacity to invoke legal authorities, but rather in what LaFave (2006) calls "non-invocation" of the law, in choosing not to arrest, detain, fine, or penalise travellers. In other words, discretion was long understood in terms of what officers choose *not* to do rather than in what they choose to do.

Nevertheless, I wish to suggest that discretion, when viewed as exercise of choice over the framing of an interaction, is enabled rather than diminished by computer-assisted enforcement. Officers can now choose whether or not they blame the computer, and if so, the manner in which they do so. Blaming the computer has become a discretionary activity employed by officers to better carry out their responsibilities.

In this paper, I consider what it means to blame a computer at a port of entry, looking at the origins, benefits, and the hazards of the practice. I review existing literature looking at the role computers have played in broader shifts in Canadian border enforcement since 1990, tying this to interviews with retired officers at the Cornwall Port of Entry. In doing so, I seek to enhance conventional understandings of what constitutes discretion in border work. I also expand upon Erving Goffman's longstanding sociology of "face work" by looking at the ways in which computer-mediated interactions engender new possibilities for officers' presentation and maintenance of their own face, and those of travellers.

In focusing on the role of computer-generated and computer-attributed referrals in border service officers' (BSO) face work, I expand upon an emergent scholarship exploring the role of computing technologies in border policing (Gilboy 1991; Zureik and Salter 2011; Côté-Boucher 2013; Breckenridge 2014). In considering face to face interactions that take place in primary inspection, I draw upon a limited but noteworthy scholastic body which has (implicitly and explicitly) explored the role of face work in policing (Sheffer 2009).

**Methods and Limitations**

Here I draw upon ethnographic fieldwork of more than one year conducted at the Cornwall Port of Entry in Cornwall, Ontario and the Mohawk community of Akwesasne, which accounts for the vast majority of cross-border traffic through the port. Data collection included archival research, participant and non-participant observation, interviews with cross-border travellers, and interviews and surveying with currently employed and retired line officers and administrators. I also traversed the Canadian and US ports of entry more than 500 times over the course of a yearlong cross-border commute to the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne's (MCA) aboriginal rights research office in St. Regis Village *(Kanatakon)*, both alone, and with a wide demographic of passengers, experiencing a variety of referrals.

Additional data, including the titular quote, "don't blame me", are taken from the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal's case Fallan Davis vs. the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA). Davis, a young Mohawk resident of Akwesasne, filed a complaint through the commission that she had been discriminated against on the grounds of age, sex, and race. I draw upon transcriptions of the trial's first iteration in 2007, and my own courtroom observations from 2013–2014. The courtroom, I found, was one of the ideal sites to observe more-or-less frank discussions of officers' discretionary activities, something many officers are reluctant to share in interviews. As one interviewee, a retired officer told me, "In court, it's the only place you tell the truth". The CBSA's efforts to disprove discrimination required revealing aspects of "trade craft" that they may otherwise not impart to a researcher. While there is an opacity in the border services' willingness to openly discuss the "black box" of computer data analysis, court cases sometimes offer the best opportunity to glimpse inside that box.

Mohawk political ontology has become an increasingly popular topic for scholarly inquiry in recent years. Akwesasne's complex and sometimes conflicting attitudes towards the state (Alfred 2005; Alfred 2009; Simpson 2014), the border, and its enforcement are an integral facet of daily activities at the Cornwall Port of Entry and are considered at length in my doctoral thesis. They also play a role in the distinct challenges of officers at the Cornwall Port of Entry.

Nevertheless, this paper is not about Akwesasne. My emphasis here is on the Canadian border officers, and my discussions of Akwesasne are not designed to go beyond that which is immediately relevant and known to border officers. This paper also does not engage with grand theory on borders or settler colonialism, which are two themes that immediately come to mind when considering the border situation at Akwesasne. My focus here is, instead, on everyday border policing in an admittedly exceptional environment.

I also devote more space to background information and setting than papers of similar length, and readers may be frustrated by the fact that the discussion of computer-attributed referrals only follows after several pages of background. This attention is regrettable but necessary to provide context to the particularities of the local border operation. It is difficult to "jump right into" a discussion of border operations without first offering context.

It may be interesting to note that the above paragraph is an example of the sort of "face work" to which I attribute officers. I am saying "don't blame me, it's the complexity of the situation" which has forced lengthy exposition on what should otherwise be a brief paper. In doing so, I seek the reader's trust, forgiveness, and willingness to read on. In making an excuse, I suggest, "this isn't what I'm really like, I'm usually a much more efficient writer", much as border officers suggest,

"this isn't what I'm really like, I'm usually a much more understanding person" when they point to the computer as the source of a traveller's discomfort. In either situation, I leave it to you to weigh the excuse's validity.

**Border Work at the Cornwall Port of Entry**

To most drivers, the Cornwall Port of Entry superficially resembles many other mid-sized Canadian ports of entry. A traveller, having come across the Saint Lawrence River from the United States, is filtered into the port of entry after crossing the bridge. Commercial vehicles are sent to the right for processing, while non-commercial travellers line up to wait on one of five Primary Inspection Lane (PIL) booths. There, they will pull up to the booth, provide their travel documents, and speak to an officer. The majority of travellers will, after a few cursory questions about citizenship, status, and declarations, be told "have a nice day" and allowed to proceed.

Other travellers are referred to "secondary inspection". This means they are told to park their car and asked to wait inside the main facility for greater scrutiny. Officers may also take the keys directly and move the car themselves. Often, secondary inspection involves a search of the traveller's vehicle (sometimes referred to by officers as their "conveyance"). Travellers may also be sent to secondary for duty assessment or to fill out immigration documents. I discuss the types of referrals and reasons for them in a later section.

Most officers at the port are from the area, located roughly halfway between Montreal and Ottawa, and chose employment by the CBSA as an opportunity for a well-paying job near their hometowns. Entry level positions offer a relatively high salary for the region and require a relatively low education, though many officers have degrees and/or additional training in pertinent fields such as criminology.

Officers at Cornwall are a fairly even split of male and female, with a few status-bearing aboriginal officers and several more who self-identify as native without any legal status. Many line officers at the Cornwall Port of Entry began their work during or after the institutional shift towards border security and away from revenue generation (discussed in detail below). As a result, most line officers are younger than 50 – with many older officers, who did not want to carry a firearm, opting for early retirement or transition to administrative work.

Yet, the Cornwall Port of Entry is unique amongst Canadian ports as a stressful and tight-knit work environment. One retired officer described his work as "long periods of boredom interspersed with sudden periods of terror". Another retired officer described himself and his colleagues as "tighter than a group of drunken thieves". A recurring (quasi) joke amongst BSOs was that if an officer messes up, they will be sent to Cornwall.

This is a reference, in part, to Cornwall's reputation in Canada as an unpleasant place to live, but more substantially to several enforcement challenges unique to the port. In the below sections, I highlight two unique challenges faced by local border operations: engagement with the adjacent Mohawk community of Akwesasne and the handling of a mixed traffic of 'international' and 'domestic' travellers.

**Relationships with the Akwesasne Mohawk Territory – Trust Management**

The majority of travellers processed at the Cornwall Port of Entry are indigenous residents of the Akwesasne Mohawk territory, which straddles the Canada/US borderline. This relationship has engendered unique challenges in local processing, placing even greater onus on the CBSA to maintain a positive relationship with the community. Maintaining trust with the community on an institutional and interpersonal level has been an on-going objective, and challenge, for the CBSA.

As with other Mohawk peoples, Akwesasronon have a long history of articulating their own sovereignty independent of Canada and the United States and resisting the legitimacy of the Canada/US border. Resistance takes the form of political protests, international lobbying, and the use of locally produced passports, but it is also manifested in everyday interactions with BSOs. Most interactions are brief and innocuous, though tensions have flared up in the past, with travellers and officers arguing or coming to blows with one another.

Akwesasne is also considered a hotspot for what is sometimes referred by to as "international trade" by some Akwesasronon, and "smuggling" by BSOs (see Simpson 2014). Weapons, drugs, alcohol, undocumented immigrants, but mostly tobacco can easily be brought across the Canada/US border because of Akwesasne's unique geopolitical situation. For many Mohawks, some facets of this trade, especially the innocuous 'butt-legging' of tax-free cigarettes across the border, is seen not through a negative lens of illegality, but rather through the positive lens as political praxis, as enacting sovereignty (ibid.).

Cornwall's status as a high-rate-of-smuggling corridor has made it a focal point for Canadian intelligence operations. It is for this reason that a joint law enforcement task force was created in the city of Cornwall, which existed from 1993 to 2000 and was revived in 2010. Many task force leaders were experienced BSOs who brought a deep-seated knowledge of, and relationship with, Akwesasne into operations. Prior to this, intelligence operations were largely local and built on relationships officers had formed with residents of Akwesasne over the years.

Identification proves another challenge which may be mitigated, in part, by positive rapport, as the status of Mohawks is frequently harder to ascertain than that of other travellers. Many in Akwesasne have long refused to provide any identification document if not explicitly asked to do so, and because of their native status, a variety of documents can be used in cross-border travel other than a passport, such as a 'status' card demonstrating their aboriginal status in Canada.

Though they may initially refuse to provide documentation, many travellers are far more willing to put up with officers' questions if they feel they are framed in a polite and respectful manner even if some, seeing the border itself as an affront to their sovereignty, arrive at the port predisposed toward belligerence. As one chief in the Mohawk government compared American officers' success in this with the Canadians' failures in years past: "When you came through, American customs officers would routinely refer to you by name, 'how's the family', 'where're you going', etc. And you didn't mind telling them where your point of destination was because of the way it was framed."

The chief went on to note that relationships have long been more strained between Canada and Akwesasne than the United States, owing in large part to the US's formal recognition of indigenous border rights and greater consistency of service.

The development of positive relationships represents a long-term concern for border policing at the Cornwall Port of Entry. Officers will frequently encounter travellers on multiple occasions.

Maintaining a good face for both individual officers, and the CBSA makes it possible for agents to do their jobs effectively. As much as suspicious travellers can be 'flagged' by officers, Akwesasronon circulate stories of disrespectful or problematic officers both in person and through online forums. If a particularly loathed officer is working in a booth, it may be noted online, so that other Akwesasronon can avoid their scrutiny. Residents post messages such as "jerk in lane three", to advise each other's travel.

"Trust management" rather than "risk management" (Zureik and Salter 2011) has long defined good border work at the Cornwall Port of Entry. The successes of the CBSA in this regard have been mixed, following a nadir in rapport when the Cornwall Port of Entry was relocated in 2009 following protests at the arming of border officers, tensions seem to have cooled. Most Akwesasronon I spoke to suggest that even if not good, the situation has gotten better. At present, the most readily apparent source of tension is no longer in the arming of officers, but the port's status as a mixed traffic corridor.

**A Mixed Traffic Corridor – Consent and Coercion**

Cornwall is also currently the only major Canadian port located along a "mixed traffic corridor", as defined under section 99.1(F) of the Canada Customs Act. As a result, officer powers are more ambiguous there than elsewhere, and, again, maintaining friendly rapport with travellers is of added advantage. Situated more than three kilometres inland, the port handles a mixed traffic of both international travellers, whose journeys began in the United States, and domestic travellers whose journeys began on Cornwall Island, Ontario.

Though the demands of a mixed traffic corridor are not explicitly tied to the processing of native travellers, Cornwall's status as such is the product of a devolution of CBSA-Akwesasne relations, and nearly all mixed traffic travellers are Akwesasronon. Following Mohawk protests against the arming of line officers in 2009, the port of entry's location was moved off the reserve and onto the Canadian mainland. At present, Mohawk residents of Cornwall Island, several thousand Canadian citizens, live sandwiched between the Cornwall port located north of Cornwall Island and the Massena port located south of Cornwall Island. Even if they began their journey in what is ostensibly Canada, those residents are forced to traverse customs anytime they drive onto the Canadian mainland.

The powers of officers are determined by what sort of traveller they process and vastly limited in the case of domestic travellers. Stopping, searching, and interrogating a 'domestic' traveller is tantamount to a police officer pulling over a citizen and doing so, and BSOs are not allowed to do so. Officers are legally required to demonstrate 'reasonable' justification for searching both international and domestic travellers, though the standard for what is 'reasonable' is much wider for international travellers, who – as far as officers are concerned – may 'reasonably' expect to be searched and questioned any time they cross the border (Pratt 2010).

Unique to Cornwall, officers must first determine what sort of traveller they are dealing with before determining their enforcement mandate and powers vis-à-vis that traveller. Officers have no way of knowing at the moment they are talking to a traveller whether that traveller is international or domestic. The fact that an officer has to make demands of a traveller in order to determine what demands they may make of a traveller offers a challenge for officers' efforts to legally do their jobs.

Because their powers are often nebulous, officers frequently rely on what Ericson (2007) calls "policing by consent" in order to determine the admissibility of travellers without potentially violating their rights. Officers will often ask for more information than they may legally be entitled to, but do so in such a way that it can be considered a request rather than a demand. This is often done through use of indirect, indefinite, or subjunctive language – utterances such as "Could you open your trunk for me?" or "Would you mind showing me your passport?" This is an enforcement tactic employed by border officers throughout Canada and the United States, but is especially salient in Cornwall.

Early in my fieldwork, while traversing the port of entry as a domestic traveller, an officer asked me for my visa. Knowing that officers are not supposed to ask for documentation from domestic travellers (it would be like a police officer stopping a random stranger and demanding their passport), I asked her, "are you allowed to ask me for that?" To which she replied, "I'm asking you for that". I complied with her request.

As a brief aside: a counter-narrative of policing-by-consent can be seen in the idea of 'knowing your rights'. In many discussions of their encounters with border officers, Akwesasronon explained knowing their rights in terms of knowing when a policing directive is a request, and knowing when it is a demand. Knowing one's rights involves knowing when one can say "no". On several occasions, when traveling with someone from Akwesasne, they asked why they were being asked for their identification, though they eventually provided it. However, the vast majority of requests are granted without hesitation, and without travellers even realizing that they have been asked, rather than told, to comply.

Policing by consent is employed by both inland police and officers all along the borderline, but it is even more prevalent in Cornwall due to the port's mixed traffic status. There, garnering consent is not simply a path toward good policing, it is a path toward ensuring legal policing. There are two immediately recognisable advantages to a policing by consent approach – the first is that officers no longer have to worry about whether they have met the legal standards necessary to demand compliance. If travellers assent to a search, they have relinquished any right to refuse. The second advantage is that, if successful, such requests maintain a more positive dynamic between officers and travellers within the exchange. Social, rather than legal obligation is easier for officers to work with. In the next section, I look to one theory of social obligation, "face work", to explore how creation and maintenance face plays out in everyday interactions between border officers and travellers.

**Computer Attribution as Face Work**

Face work is a term coined by Erving Goffman (1967) to describe the various means by which individuals express and maintain their "positive social image", or "face", in an interaction. Goffman remarks that in any given interaction, each participant will present a "line", a particular image of "what sort of person they are", and "what sort of person" they take the other party to be. In this section, I demonstrate that good face work is an essential facet of good border work, and that computer attributed referrals offer a new means by which officers can articulate and save face in interactions.

If the line one has presented is demonstrated false, a loss of face occurs, which jeopardises the interaction. If I tell someone I am kosher, but then begin eating a ham sandwich, I will be

embarrassed and may lose face. I will have to either account for the disparity – "oh, I thought this was chicken", or, "I've recently converted", or risk losing respect. Alternatively, the interlocutor can choose to ignore my actions (although this will still affect their attitude towards me). However, once it has been pointed out that the face I have presented does not mesh with the empirical reality, something has to be said. Similarly, if I try to represent myself as reasonable, patient, and understanding, and my actions seem unreasonable, impatient, or obtuse, I must try to account for the disparity or risk losing face.

Anne Collette Sheffer writes,

> "There are two ways in which the maintenance of face works to the benefit of police: (1) in a precautionary management of the overall detention of a suspect during a field interrogation, and (2) a restorative management of the suspect's behaviour in cases in which the S[uspect] loses control, so that the situation does not degenerate further into physical violence." (Sheffer 2009: 32–33)

Though border officers share responsibilities of bureaucracy and policing, arguably two sides of the same coin, in face work, their activities are much more closely tied to the demands of policing.

Computer-attributed referrals grant officers a means to preserve face by telling travellers, in effect, "I'm not the sort of person who would send you in", thereby maintaining face as a reasonable, easy-going, kind, responsible, sympathetic, or understanding officer. This offers a way to reconcile the empirical fact that a traveller has been referred into secondary inspection with the self-image a BSO has presented.

The title of this paper, "don't blame me, it's just the computer telling me to do this" is taken from a CBSA lawyer's examination of a retired officer at the Ontario Human Rights tribunal (discussed above). The lawyer was surprised that the officer had felt free to inform travellers that their referral was randomly computer generated. The exchange, which I reproduce below, also demonstrates both generational ambivalence towards computers and an officer's understanding of discretionary authority over computer-attributed referrals. I recorded it in-situ during the proceedings. As personal recording devices were not allowed in the courtroom, I have striven for accuracy, but the text is likely not verbatim.

> *CBSA Attorney:* So there were occasions where you referred her to secondary examination while you were working in lane four [the Akwesasne residents' lane]
> *Officer (Retired):* Yes. I remember one situation where it was a computer-generated referral, and again these computer-generated referrals have you sending people back, and there isn't a reasonable justification for it. I was trained that you have to have reasonable grounds to do this search, but the computer policy implemented by CBSA generates a percentage of secondary referrals, so what was happening was that first nations people who were crossing the border 10–15 times a day, were getting sent by a computer-generated referral, not from an officer's interaction with that person.
> *Attorney (surprised):* How would she know that? Did you tell her that?
> *Officer:* Sometimes I would to de-escalate the situation.
> *CBSA Attorney:* Did you tell her that she had been sent back because of a random referral?
> *Officer:* On occasion.
> *CBSA Attorney:* Are you supposed to do that?
> *Officer:* It's officer's discretion.

*CBSA Attorney:* On a random referral?

*Officer:* Yes, because you could ask for a freedom of information act and find out. But if a traveller asks me why I sent them back…

*CBSA Attorney:* (interrupts) "Don't blame me, it's just the computer telling me to do this"

*Officer:* Exactly

*CBSA Attorney:* Is it the case that every negative interaction was with a computer referral?

*Officer:* No

*CBSA Attorney:* And did you tell her why?

*Officer:* Your truck is running low in the back, your tires are low on air, you wouldn't tell people, because that would be giving away trade secrets. This system is used across Canada and because this port is unique and to diffuse situations, we told people if they questioned it. So if I go to the airport and I'm going through the security check, and I'm told that I have to go through the scanner, let's say they ask me, to check me, I get patted down, random referrals are done in the airport context too…

*CBSA Attorney:* So if I kick up a fuss and start getting upset, according to you, you could tell me why I got referred in?

*Officer:* Yes. To a point. And I had no problems telling people it was a computer-generated referral because I personally didn't believe in them. On my training, from 1990 onward, that was the policy of the CBSA, which has changed. I don't agree with the fact that there don't have to have indicators or probable grounds to do a search, so you could be searched because the computer told me to search you. I'd always been trained that I had to make the decision. You do get enforcement out of that, but it's like going to the casino. You roll the dice. It's to make sure that the frequent fliers are being truthful. Sometimes a random referral might catch something an officer may otherwise miss. When you deal with 400 cars an hour, you miss a lot.

I should note that there is some confusion in this exchange as to the relationship between a 'computer-generated referral' and a 'random referral'. In the context of this conversation, they are synonymous, but this is not the case in fact. All random referrals are computer-generated, but not all computer-generated referrals are random. I explain this in greater detail in the next section.

Whereas the CBSA attorney viewed computer-attributed referrals as a concession on the part of an officer if a traveller "kick[s] up a fuss", the officer saw attributing the referral to the computer as both a way of de-escalating a tense interaction with a traveller and of voicing dissatisfaction with broader changes in Canadian border enforcement post 1990. In de-escalating situations, it was seen simply as good practice. The officer, who interacted with this traveller on a daily basis for years, recognised the long-term importance of maintaining a positive relationship with her. Even if he did not have a long-term relationship with her, it would have helped mollify her in that particular exchange.

Computer-attributed referrals not only seek to preserve the face of officers, but also that of travellers. They are also a way of stating, "I do not think you are the sort of person who would have to be sent in". By blaming the computer, officers can continue to respect the traveller's face as a reasonable, responsible, law-abiding person. Goffman's dramaturgical approach to impression management suggests that people often perform the roles that are assigned to them. By allowing a traveller to maintain face as law abiding, suggesting "you seem like a reasonable person […]" travellers will often try to be worthy of the mantle that has been bestowed upon them. This is a two-way street, as travellers may also attempt to bestow a particular face upon officers as reasonable and accommodating.

Not all 'face work' requires being liked, even if that is the most common aim. Officers sometimes accuse travellers of breaking the law in order to elicit either greater compliance out of fear, or a confession. For example, officers may tell a traveller they suspect of intoxication, "you're drunk, I can smell it on your breath", rather than ask "have you been drinking?" One Akwesasne resident, and former police officer, was incensed when an officer (incorrectly) told him, "I heard you got stopped for drunk driving". Much as officers may sometimes depict a traveller as law-abiding in order to elicit compliance, they may also depict a traveller as law-violating in order to elicit a confession. Similarly, travellers looking to pick a fight with officers will not always have much difficulty convincing one to be difficult.

Of course, some faces are intentionally employed as subterfuge. A traveller with a trunk filled with cigarettes will often attempt to seem law-abiding, until the officer goes to search their car at which point they may try to drive away rapidly. Impression management is one facet of steering an interaction to achieve one's goals. Our hypothetical smuggler may present themselves as in a hurry, or present the officer as easy-going to allay suspicion.

With computer-attributed referrals, officers can simultaneously subject travellers to greater scrutiny while avoiding social accountability for that referral. In effect, they can 'have their cake and eat it too', maintaining the face of themselves and the traveller, while at the same time conducting a search. At the same time, the success of a computer-attributed referral is contingent upon the success with which an officer convinces a traveller that they are being genuine. If a traveller feels the officer is lying, their reaction will be negative rather than positive, possibly inhibiting compliance and making the officer's job tougher. I discuss unsuccessful attributions at greater length at the end of this paper.

**Referrals**

I discussed computer-generated and computer-attributed referrals in the previous section. Here I unpack my use of the terms.

A referral in primary inspection occurs when a BSO sends a traveller to secondary inspection, usually located in the port of entry compound. At secondary inspection, travellers and their conveyances may be searched, travellers may be questioned with greater scrutiny, goods may be charged duty or confiscated, and travellers can be denied entrance into Canada, as well. If a traveller requires a visa, this would be handled at secondary.

Some referrals are computer-generated – a notification appears on the officers' computer screen telling them to send the traveller to secondary inspection, or providing some other information to foster officer scrutiny. Computer-generated referrals may be the consequence of a traveller being 'flagged', or they may be 'random'.

Flagging occurs when the traveller has accrued some sort of record, this can range from an unsettled ticket or arrest to a past failure to declare goods or simply another officer feeling something 'is up' with the traveller when they had crossed the border previously. Officers would not give me a complete list of what leads to a flag, though I found one instance in which officers themselves did not know the meaning of a flagging code and spent a dozen minutes conferring with their colleagues. Flagging also existed prior to computers, but was much more limited – a license plate number could be written down in a customs booth, and ports could be notified about

suspicious travellers, but the CBSA's ability to acquire and share information was severely limited prior to computerisation.

Random referrals select a percentage of cross-border travellers for search. Unlike flagging, the travellers have not done anything to provoke such scrutiny. As the officer in the next section remarks, these referrals helped to "make sure frequent fliers [repeat cross-border travellers] are being truthful."

Having distinguished 'flagging' and 'random' referrals, it is also useful to distinguish between computer-generated referrals (when a computer instructs the officer to refer a traveller) and computer-attributed referral (when an officer informs a traveller that their referral was because of a computer). Computer-generated referrals result from the material demands of computer-based enforcement. Computer-attributed referrals speak more to the social dimension of such enforcement.

Not all referrals are computer-generated, many are still at the sole discretion of an officer who may stop a traveller for a wide variety of reasons, such as a declaration they make or because they seem 'suspicious'. Officers are also obligated to refer travellers if they require immigration or customs processing. These referrals are considered 'mandatory' even if nothing pops up on their computer screen.

Not all computer-generated referrals are computer-attributed either – officers may refuse to provide any justification for their referral and simply insist that a traveller submit themselves to further inspection. In several instances at the Unite States border, when I asked officers why I was being searched, they simply told me that they had the authority to do so. Officers are under no obligation to 'blame the computer', and some, such as the officer on the stand, may be scrutinised for doing so. Nor are all computer-attributed referrals really computer-generated. Officers may lie when blaming the computer in order to put a traveller at ease or avoid culpability for the referral. There is no direct oversight to ensure that an officer does not tell a traveller that the computer has flagged them when, in fact, the referral was of the officer's volition.

**Computers and the Changing Face of Officer Discretion**

Today, it is difficult to imagine border processing without computers, yet the technology is a relatively recent addition to the repertoire employed by the CBSA. Many other new technologies – scanning, surveillance, and biometrics – are the direct fruit of this addition and can only work when their data are processed and repackaged through computers.

Because computers arrived alongside a paradigmatic shift in border enforcement, the specific roles they played in that shift may be obscured. It is at times difficult to differentiate what changes were the result of policy, and what changes were the direct result of the material possibilities, necessities, and limitations of the computers themselves. Below, I highlight some of the ways in which the material possibilities and demands of computers have impacted both the face work of officers and the manner in which they conceptualise their discretionary authority.

Computers were part of a broader overhaul of changes in enforcement policy and organisation in 'the 1990s'. I put this period in quotations because though the changes began earlier and continued until later, officers recognise that decade as the epicentre of those changes. Broadly speaking, border officers gained a wider range of powers including, and at times greater than, those of inland

police officers, while at the same time becoming responsible to the demands of both new technologies and a wider variety of external agencies.

The introduction of new enforcement practices and computer technologies in Cornwall was met with ambivalence by officers (cf. Côté-Boucher 2013). BSOs appreciated the computer's efficiency and its ability to streamline data, yet they often found themselves frustrated by a loss of agency in exercising their discretion. As Côté-Boucher suggests, reactions to this technology were largely generational. Young officers whose entire careers have involved interfacing with a computer tend to take the technology for granted (ibid.). Older officers, in contrast, take issue at times with computer-generated referrals.

The fact that officers' powers have expanded while their capacity to exercise those powers has diminished represents what Côté-Boucher (2015) has called "the paradox of discretion". Indeed, all of the officers I interviewed who began work prior to the 1990s lamented a loss of discretion in the 1990s. Yet, the way they described that discretion was not in terms of the ability to exercise their powers, but rather in their ability to choose when not to do so.

Many of the retired officers I interviewed, who began their careers prior to the introduction of computers to border policing, voiced frustration with random referrals. One stated,

> "And even when the computer system came in, they had random referrals. The computer would just pick a number at random and that vehicle would be sent to the back. And we just go, are you crazy? We know who it is. We've seen the same person four times today, it's this little grey-haired old lady that's going back and forth to see her kids. No, you've got to send them to the back, you haven't got a choice. We're going guys, its February, there's a freaking storm, the lady's 80 years old, are you out of your freaking mind?"

In the above anecdote, an officer was frustrated because he was unable to choose not to search the little grey-haired old lady because he was obligated to do so by the computer. Both flagging and random referrals limited officers' capacities to determine when to let a traveller go.

Even if line officers came to see this as a loss of discretion, administrators exercise their own choice in selecting the algorithms by which 'random' computer-generated inspections occur. The Cornwall Port of Entry, for example, because it handles a large amount of commuter traffic which crosses the border regularly, has lowered the threshold for random inspections in order to account for repeat travellers. This does not mean that those travellers are not randomly stopped, but it does mean that such stoppages are diminished. There is room for administrative discretion in terms of how much discretion to deny officers.

While observing officer courtroom testimony, a former port administrator stated that the random referral rate in the Cornwall Port of Entry was kept substantially lower than at similarly sized ports in Canada in order to account for the high volume of commuter traffic from Akwesasne. Even if random computer-generated referrals are indeed indiscriminate, the frequency with which they occur is the consequence of administrative choice.

This fact is something that CBSA does not widely advertise. I was only made aware of it through a courtroom testimony seeking to demonstrate that the CBSA does not discriminate against Mohawk People. When I emailed the administrator for clarification, I received no reply.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of line officers, both random referrals and flags make it harder for them to exercise discretion. This belief is built upon a particular understanding of discretion. Officers did not lament their loss of powers, indeed their powers expanded, so much as their loss of

choice as to when *not* to enforce a law or statute, what LaFave (2006) calls "non-invocation" of the law.

It is in non-invocation that the discretionary activities of border officers most frequently manifested. This departs from the way in which discretion is typically discussed, as the capacity to exercise choice as to when to enforce legal statutes. It is a subtle distinction, but one that matters, as it explains why officers came to see computers as, initially, limiting discretion despite their expanded powers. In a nutshell, discretion was often seen as saying, "I choose not to do this" rather than "I choose to do this".

As LaFave (2006) notes, it is difficult to study non-invocation of the law, as non-invocation is, by its very nature, frequently undocumented. At the same time, much of the discretionary activities of officers involve choosing not to apply the letter of the law in a given instance. While an officer will certainly investigate a charge of kidnapping, or terrorism, or smuggling, they may ignore a small duty infringement or a slightly out-dated form of identification. Non-invocation frees law enforcement to focus on more serious crimes, and helps officers develop rapport with civilians which may pay off in the long run. In processing Akwesasronon travellers at the Cornwall Port of Entry, non-invocation has long been a common practice.

By choosing not to invoke the law, BSOs have understood part of their authority as determining whether referrals are mandatory or not. This may seem confusing, as one would assume that mandatory referrals are called-so for a reason. Nevertheless, from an officer perspective, this is one facet of discretion. In the below courtroom exchange, the chairperson (judge for the human rights tribunal) asked for clarification on this point.

*Chairperson:* Finally, if I understood well, she was not obliged to pay [duties] for these – the products she was – she had with her. Is this the case?
*CBSA Attorney:* No, she was required to pay the duties, but –
*Chairperson:* Was she?
*CBSA Attorney:* – she was obligated under the remission order to pay duties, but she was allowed to leave without paying duties that day.
*Chairperson:* Okay, she was allowed to? So, therefore –
*CBSA Attorney:* Ultimately.
*Chairperson:* So therefore, since she was not obliged to pay duties for these products, why don't you raise this – all?
*CBSA Attorney:* Pardon me?
*Chairperson:* She was not obliged finally to pay duties on that. Why?
*CBSA Attorney:* We haven't gotten to that yet. That – that was ultimately a discretion or decision I understand made by management –
*Chairperson:* Discretion – decision, but I imagine that if she had been obliged to pay, she would have been forced to pay?
*CBSA Attorney:* I'm sorry, you're saying that – I don't quite understand. You're saying that if the fact that she wasn't required to pay at the end of the day meant that she wasn't obligated legally to pay duties?
*Chairperson:* I imagine so.
*CBSA Attorney:* That's your – okay [....]

The officer on duty subsequently stated that he did not charge duty in order to "de-escalate" a tense situation. They chose not to make a "mandatory referral" mandatory. For the CBSA Attorney, there

was no logical inconsistency with the fact that an Akwesasne traveller was obligated to pay duties under the law (which, in fact, she would have likely been exempted from) and the fact that she was not obligated to pay those duties. However, the chairperson, a Canadian judge, could not accept this inconsistency. Ultimately, as it was not a critical matter for the case, the two agreed to disagree about the "discretion – decision" of port administrators not to invoke the customs act in this particular instance.

Officers' capacity to choose when a requirement is not mandatory has been limited by computers. With computer generated referrals, there exists a record of the computer informing the officer to refer the traveller, and a record of whether or not the traveller actually was sent. As a result, computer-generated mandatory referrals are always mandatory.

Officer compliance with computer-generated referrals is enforced by other digital technologies, particularly surveillance technologies. Many line officers I spoke with lamented their reduced agency in determining who is sent to secondary inspection. One officer, whom I quote at greater length below, was frustrated by his inability to exercise discretion in processing travellers he knew personally, "everything's on camera, everything's recorded. You'd be fucked, I'd be in the office in an hour". Computer-generated referrals are also digitally enforced.

While the visitor to a port of entry may see cameras as ensuring travellers behave in accordance with the law, officers I spoke to express their own anxieties about those technologies. Video cameras discipline officers as much as they do travellers, ensuring that officers listen to their supervisors and the computer.

A retired officer voiced his displeasure at the inability to challenge such a referral:

> "Sometimes it's shitty, because it's like you know me […] and the car's flagged. And you're like, I've gotta send you in, and they're like 'fuck you.' 'It's my job, bro. I've got to send you in.' If I was [still] doing an enforcement job, I'd rather not know anybody."

This story highlights the ways in which computer-generated referrals resituated interpersonal interactions between officers and travellers in Cornwall. It also brings us back to my general discussion of the role of computer attributions in officers' face work.

The officer's statement, "I'd rather not know anybody" bespoke the impact his activities had on the ways in which Akwesasronon, including friends and extended family members, perceived him. In the "shitty" exchange, a computer-generated referral rendered the officer, who told me he took pride in his face as, in his words, "the chill guy", unable to maintain such an image. He lost face when he was demonstrably not "the chill guy" for referring a traveller he knew personally. The success with which that officer could recover or maintain his "chill guy" image was determined by the success with which he could convince the traveller that the referral came from the computer and not his own agency – in effect, him saying "I'm still the chill guy, this is the computer's fault".

This was especially important to this officer, for whom face work was not simply about successful enforcement, or politeness, but about reconciling his work and his ties to the community. Ultimately, this officer told me that he decided to retire early because he could not handle the stress of having to send people he knew into inspection.

Intelligence practices, in particular, became decentralised in the 1990s. This was especially influential in Cornwall when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) joint task force supplanted the authority of port officers in anti-smuggling activities. Previously, intelligence had

been rooted in interpersonal relationships and on-the-job training. Though the "disembedding" (Côté-Boucher 2013) of intelligence practices to other agencies changed how intelligence worked, computerisation of intelligence also impacted the way officers interfaced with available intelligence.

An officer discussed his experiences prior to the addition of computer intelligence to PIL booths:

> "When I started, we didn't have the computerisation we have today, and our lookout system was maybe written on a piece of paper. But I remember older officers, when an individual would come through now they'd say you know that guy who went through in such and such a car? You keep your eye on him, because we nailed him twelve years ago. Well, I was keeping my eye on that man for more than 30 years, and that's my point. If you had an issue with that guy, and it happened ten years ago with an older officer, that older officer is training this new officer, and I was telling that to people when I was going out the door. You see that guy there, that old bastard, keep an eye on him. Well Christ, he was about 90 years old by then. So that guy went through his life getting screwed at the border, and that wasn't because of the computer, that was because of what I was told. "

Even if the officer exercised personal autonomy in scrutinising the 90 year old man, this was bound to an orally disseminated institutional memory. In reflecting on these actions after retirement, he recognised that such scrutiny was problematic. Though we typically recognise one advantage of computers is that they never forget, this is not entirely the case in digitised border intelligence. A simple 'delete' to the 90 year old man's flag could have done what 30 years of interaction have not. In other words, computers can be more effective at forgetting than officers. Even if that officer could not forget his mentor's warnings about particular travellers, he no longer saw such warnings as part of his mandate in training new officers.

Finally, 'scannability' has become an essential facet of the interface between computer intelligence and front line border work. The CBSA instituted a 'universal compliance' policy directive in recent years requiring that all travellers produce identification which is then entered into the system. Whereas some legally accepted forms of identification, such as passports and enhanced drivers licenses, can be scanned, others, such as Indian Status Cards, cannot. Officers found themselves asking travellers for additional pieces of identification if they had difficulty scanning or manually entering some information. While indigenous Canadians can legally enter Canada on a status card proving Canadian birth, most of these cards are not scannable. Some Akwesasronon travellers expressed confusion as to which forms of identification are now acceptable, and why they may be asked for a driver's license when they have produced a status card proving Canadian citizenship. Officers explained that while the license was not required, scanning it would speed up processing. In this regard, the efficacy of computer-based intelligence has spread into new requirements over which forms of identification are compatible. In this particular instance, ironically, efforts by the Canadian state to recognise indigenous status as distinct resulted in practice in a greater demand on indigenous travellers.

**Framing as Discretion**

The addition of computers to border enforcement practices at the Cornwall Port of Entry diminished officer's discretionary authority to choose not to invoke legal authority while enabling greater discretionary authority for administrators in choosing the algorithms by which "random" stops occur. While officers still 'non-invoke' the customs act for minor declarations, and identifications, their capacity to do so has been severely limited.

But this is not the end of the story. Karine Côté-Boucher (2013, 2015) has noted other ways in which officers, in the wake of the "paradox of discretion", found new ways of reconciling and valuing their positions. Training and use of handguns was one such example in which the CBSA maintained its relevance as a law enforcement agency in the wake of a loss of personal agency in officer enforcement practices (ibid.). Here, I wish to suggest that one way officers came to find meaning in post-computer enforcement was through re-defining discretion not in terms of exercise, or non-exercise, of legal authority, but in the 'framing' of their mandate.

Here, I employ the term 'framing' as it has been used by Erving Goffman (1974), to denote the means by which individuals come to understand 'what is going on' in a given situation. In 'blaming the computer' officers frame a referral for the traveller, defining, or trying to define, for that traveller, 'what is going on'. Even if officers cannot determine who is sent to secondary, they can determine how they justify that referral to the traveller.

In the 'don't blame me' courtroom exchange, the officer is explicit about this as discretionary authority.

> *CBSA Attorney:* Did you tell her that she had been sent back because of a random referral?
> *Officer:* On occasion.
> *CBSA Attorney:* Are you supposed to do that?
> *Officer:* It's officer's discretion.

The officer framed the referral as computer-generated, and in doing so, defined the situation for her. Computer-generated referrals restrict one sort of discretionary authority historically held by officers, but they open up avenues for new sorts of discretion, particularly in attributing a referral to that computer.

One could argue that framing is something everyone does all the time, and it, in itself, does not constitute anything unique or discretionary for officers. Nevertheless, this is one of the ways officers have come to understand their discretionary authority, and as the attorney's surprise over the officer's claim to computer-attribution suggests, something that abuts the 'trade craft' which officers work hard to maintain hidden outside the organisation. Regardless of whether or not such framing is unique, or even successful, it may be considered discretionary.

His later statement "I had no problems telling people it was a computer-generated referral because I personally don't believe in them" suggests that the officer understood his decision to attribute the referral as, at least in part, his way of positioning himself as an autonomous agential actor in the face of the enforcement changes of the 1990s. In this regard, computer-attributed referral represented not necessarily standard practice, but rather one officer's reaction to an undesired change in standard practices.

**When Computer Attribution "Does Not Compute"**

The overall success of a computer-attributed referral is premised upon the officer convincing a traveller that the attribution is genuine. In my interviews with frequent cross-border travellers, I often heard, with eyes rolling, "random inspection, yeah right!", and doubt that random referrals actually exist. A selfie posted onto the popular website Reddit.com featuring a Sikh man standing in front of airport security reading "Bout to get randomly searched" went viral several years ago. Novelty t-shirt stores have begun selling shirts reading "100 percent randomly searched at the following airports". Clearly the public holds computer-attributed referrals, especially those of visible minorities, in suspicion.

As evidenced by interviews and testimony of officers and administrators, it is undeniable that randomly generated computer referrals exist, yet the widespread doubt about their veracity suggests that either there is confusion as to the difference between randomly generated computer referrals and other sorts of computer-generated referrals, or that some referrals are fallaciously labelled 'random'. If BSOs wish to successfully attribute referrals to a computer programme, they would perhaps be well suited to explain the difference between flagging and randomly generated referral to travellers and, perhaps, formally banning false-attribution of referrals.

One reviewer to this paper commented, "possibly there is a sort of racial profiling at work, inscribed into the computer programme? I am sure a name like Muhammed or Ahmed predestines you for a search". I feel this concern requires direct response, because I think it will be shared by many readers.

My own knowledge of the programming behind 'random' referrals is limited to my interviews with officers and personal observations. If there is racial profiling inscribed into the programme, or more accurately, identification of target first names, national, or ethnic background, I have encountered no suggestion of it by officers or administrators. Issues of profiling at the border are nevertheless undeniable and have been a mark of controversy all along the border. The Fallan Davis tribunal hearing was based in such concerns. There are also few limitations to officers in employing subterfuge. Though they are not encouraged to do so, officers may falsely attribute an instance of profiling to a 'random' search in order to deter scrutiny. It is not unreasonable for a traveller to suspect that their 'random' search is anything but.

In this paper, I have not attempted to scratch the surface of deep structures in governance and security which disadvantage minority groups. My goal has been to look at the ways in which border security presents itself more so than what is being presented. The successes and failure of 'blaming the computer' are intimately tied to deeper issues of race and border security, though that is a matter of on-going inquiry. To paraphrase Goffman (1974: 14), I am, in the limited capacity of this paper, more concerned with taking notes on how people sleep than waking them up. Though, pushing beyond, I am optimistic that the former may facilitate the latter.

**Rude Officers and Non-Compliant Travellers**

I have argued above that positive rapport is an integral facet of border work at the Cornwall Port of Entry. If they view officers in a positive light, travellers are more likely to answer their questions, provide identification, provide intelligence information, and consent to greater scrutiny. The easiest way for officers to achieve this is through developing and maintaining 'face'. Some of the officers I

interviewed recognised the strategic benefit of comporting themselves positively, others saw it as not intrinsically beneficial, but nevertheless part of the broader responsibilities they associated with professionalism. Others still simply did not care.

The inverse may also be true – many travellers feel that officers are more likely to 'go easy on' them when they have made a positive impression. Travellers may try to explain a mistaken or confusing statement by saying, "sorry I've had a rough day", or engage in small talk and joking. As with officers, some travellers may see this strategically, whereas others may simply see themselves as being polite. Others still simply did not care.

Not all officers are unilaterally concerned with the impression they are making. Some are willing to deal with the consequences of acting brusquely, despite the fact that it may make their job more difficult. These officers typically did not last very long in Cornwall, especially when the port was on Mohawk land.

On the other side of the booth, I encountered travellers who despise officers and take any opportunity available to let them know it. I met one exceptional traveller who told me he never said anything other than "fuck you" to officers, even as he handed over his passport. He felt that as a legal citizen of Canada they could not turn him away at the border, and despite a few negative encounters, he was willing to deal with any difficulties that arose from such a position. Good face work is especially helpful at the border, but that does not mean that everyone endeavours to do it.

One may find that the case of the Cornwall Port of Entry is so exceptional that it is not generalisable. Many border officers at other ports handle far fewer 'frequent flyers' and can see less immediate benefit in developing a rapport with a stranger they will never see again. Additionally, as all other officers deal solely with international travellers, their powers are unambiguous. After all, why not simply demand that someone open their trunk rather than frame it as a request? Why not simply demand a passport? Outside of Cornwall's 'mixed traffic' corridor, such demands are unambiguously within the discretionary authority of officers.

Anne Colette Sheffer has claimed that even otherwise uncivil interactions in police interrogations still operate within a deeper interaction order that encourages interlocutors to respect one another's face. She writes, "I argue that the police use deference and face work strategies for the same reasons that Goffman argues anyone would: Because they find it necessary to communicate respect for the 'ritual self' of the suspect" (Sheffer 2009: 44). The same argument can be extended to border officers. Even in tense, rude, or combative exchanges, some social order is typically being respected (with the possible exception of the 'fuck you' traveller). Officers and travellers take turns talking to each other, try to explain themselves, and make efforts to respect at least some facet of the person being presented to them. The dramaturgical, if not the manipulative, facets of impression management tend to remain in play.

This paper proceeds from Erving Goffman's assertion that maintaining and saving face is a fundamental facet of human activity. A warm face still matters despite, and perhaps especially alongside "the cold Skeletal hands of [bureaucracies] rational order" (Weber 1958: 347). Border officers, or at the very least, North American border officers, balancing the requirements of law enforcement and bureaucracy employ face work as police and as people.

**Conclusion**

Over my yearlong fieldwork, I traversed Canadian and American customs more than 500 times. Yet, my first 'random' stop arrived a couple months later when I was driving down from Montreal to New York with my father. After handing our passports to the American officer, he looked at us contritely, "I'm really sorry about this guys, but the computer has marked you for a random stop. Please pull your car into the lot, and we'll try to have you on your way as soon as possible". The officer was so apologetic that we felt sorrier for him than for ourselves as we sat in the port of entry while officers sifted through the contents of my trunk. If we felt any anger, disappointment, or indignation from the interaction, it was directed at the computer rather than the officer.

Twenty-five years ago, a BSO could not have convincingly told a traveller, "It is not my fault you have to undergo further inspection". There was nobody else in the booth they could blame. Targeted enforcement existed at the time, and not all referrals were solely at officer's discretion, but in the vast majority of interactions, line officers were indisputably understood as the arbiters of who was sent to further inspection and who was wished "have a nice day" and allowed on their way. This is no longer the case. Computers play an active role in determining the course of an interaction between a BSO and a traveller. Any officer can reasonably, and often convincingly, state, "don't blame me, it's the computer telling me to do this".

The above anecdote took place at a large port of entry along the Canada/US border, which handles a far greater volume of cross-border traffic than the Cornwall Port of Entry. As far as I was aware, the officer had never seen me before and would have had no reason to expect to see me again. This was different from the Cornwall Port of Entry where officers and travellers get to know each other through constant contact. Nevertheless, he exercised discretion in framing the referral by attributing its agency to the computer rather than himself. He exercised discretion in the act of apologising and telling me that he had no choice. Not all officers would have acted the same way – in other encounters, an officer is just as likely to simply state that as an officer they have the authority to stop cross-border travellers. But this officer's actions were by no means aberrant.

It made us like the officer more, or at the very least, dislike him less. It rendered my father and myself friendlier, more sympathetic, and more compliant to his requests or demands. It made the officer's job easier and more pleasant and made us less likely to resist the requests of other officers in the future.

This suggests, as Goffman consistently argued, that face work is not simply about long-term relationships, but everyday encounters. It suggests that rather than immune from caring about the importance of good face work, border enforcement officers recognise its importance both as people trying to make a good impression and law enforcement officers trying to perform their jobs successfully. Good face work is a part of good border work, not only in Cornwall but all along the borderline, and the introduction of computer-generated referrals to that work has produced new possibilities and challenges for making a good impression.

Despite, and perhaps due to, a national institutional transition towards risk management, trust management remains an important factor in face to face interactions and interpersonal relationships between travellers and officers. Travellers may be frustrated by the opacity of 'disembedded' border security practices, frustrated by faceless scrutiny by computers, algorithms, and databases they can neither see nor speak to. Officers often feel the same way.

The introduction of computer-generated referrals to CBSA practices in the 1990s resulted in new challenges and opportunities for BSOs. This was strongly felt at the Cornwall Port of Entry, which maintains a particularly close and tenuous relationship with the area's indigenous population. While many BSOs in Cornwall, and elsewhere, were frustrated by a loss of what had previously constituted discretionary authority, they have found new opportunities to exercise choice in how they frame referrals. This has been made possible, in part, by the agency both travellers and officers identify in computers. Blaming the computer is a standard practice amongst many BSOs as an expression of their displeasure with the state of the job, or simply a tool in maintaining face.

Though narratives of involvement with law enforcement and bureaucrats may often focus on moments of stress, tension, and disagreement, many of the encounters which fizzle into non-events do so because face is maintained. Indeed, the success of border officers' activities is often marked (or unremarked) by the extent to which one does not recall an interaction at all. As Michael Billig (1995) suggests, normative understandings of nation and state manifest more strongly in the banal, if not benign. Computerisation, something that appears to increase the 'cold' rationality and distance and to distance interactions between enforcers and travellers, can, in practice, improve rapport and engender friendlier relations.

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