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**It is the paper published as:**

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**Title:** Information as refuge: Informing refugee support service planning and policies

**Conference title:** Information, Interactions and Impact (i3) conference

**Dates:** June, 25-28, 2013

**Pages:** 1-4

**Abstract:**

How well do refugees recognize and understand the information horizons that open before them when they relocate from their countries of origin? How do service providers interact with newcomers and what impact do their information services have on assisting refugees to settle into unfamiliar new territories? What practices do service providers enact to enable participation and reduce barriers to information acquisition and use? How well do the providers coordinate and administer their efforts while sharing information among themselves (i.e., with other service providers)? These questions guide this study of the information behaviours of service providers working to settle refugees.

## **Information as refuge: Informing refugee support service planning and policies**

How well do refugees recognize and understand the information horizons that open before them when they relocate from their countries of origin? How do service providers interact with newcomers and what impact do their information services have on assisting refugees to settle into unfamiliar new territories? What practices do service providers enact to enable participation and reduce barriers to information acquisition and use? How well do the providers coordinate and administer their efforts while sharing information among themselves (i.e., with other service providers)? These questions guide this study of the information behaviours of service providers working to settle refugees.

Australia, like many other developed countries, accepts a certain number of immigrants and refugees every year. Refugees are people who are subject to persecution in their home country and need resettlement in another country. As refugees arrive they are settled near family members, but if they do not have family in Australia they are typically settled in regional areas, where housing and employment are perceived to be available. These refugees are not able to anticipate where in Australia they will be located and often are not provided sufficient time and enough information to investigate their host country beforehand. Therefore, when they arrive they have challenges in adjusting and adapting to their new country. New and unfamiliar social networks and contexts await them as well as new government services, educational opportunities, and housing options, about which they have very little or no prior information.

While researchers have studied the resettlement experience (Chatman, 1999; Duncan, 2007; Hancock, 2009), there are still gaps in our understanding of how refugees navigate the unfamiliar information resources they encounter in their new homes to find useful information. A qualitative methodological approach was employed to explore in-depth the information practices of refugees and the service agencies that care and provide for refugee resettlement in regional New South Wales, Australia. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were held with ten settlers and five service providers. These interviews were followed by two focus groups; one each with five refugees and five service providers. The interviews and focus group narratives were then thematically analysed to find the types of information provided by agencies and the methodologies they adopt to interact and engage with refugees and among themselves. By focusing on service providers, the analysis in this paper

contributes an understanding to a program of research investigating social inclusion and participation from the perspective of information providers and is expected to inform refugee resettlement practices and policies. The term “information horizons” is used in a metaphorical sense to portray the refugees’ view of information resources available to them. While Sonnenwald’s (2005) *information horizons* technique, requiring participants to graphically map their information horizon, was not used for this study, the interview data were analysed to produce a representation of the key service providers in the information horizon of the refugees.

Featured on this information horizon are primary service providers that ‘jut out’ to act as landmarks, and include community and public sector agencies that offer refugee resettlement services in the difficult early transition stage (Kennan, Lloyd, Qayyum, & Thompson, 2011). Also on horizon are less obvious supporting agencies such as the vocational training institutes, the local public library, city council, and even to some extent, private businesses which become increasingly important in the settling in phase. Given their number and the complexity of the organisations and agencies, refugees have difficulty navigating the unfamiliar information horizon and report that they feel a sense of information overload (Lloyd, Kennan, Thompson, & Qayyum, 2013). Therefore, the central concern of the current analysis is how service providers support refugee information acquisition through social networks, processes and contexts to enable successful transitions to new living environments. The significance of the study lies in understanding how service providers and agencies on the horizon facilitate information access and acquisition, the lack of which makes it difficult for refugees to establish the trustful relationships which are so critical for resettlement in a new country (Audunson, Essmat, & Aabo, 2011; Hynes, 2009).

This study seeks to understand how the assistance of service providers leads to community participation, reduction in social exclusion, and minimization of barriers to information acquisition and use. Implicit in the notion of social exclusion are barriers to education, healthcare and labour markets which prevent people from participating in the community they inhabit. Refugees have experienced a change of context and loss of social networks, which are critical to successful integration (Hynes, 2009; Stewart et al., 2008). Loss of social networks is particularly significant as they play an important role in defining an individual’s information horizon (Sonnenwald, 1999) and refugees compensate for that loss by selectively choosing from the information resources available to them in the new horizon.

The first analysis of the data (Kennan et al., 2011; Lloyd et al., 2013) revealed information navigation and overload difficulties for refugees despite the good intentions of the primary service providers in the transition and settling-in phases. With the change of context and absence of social networks, refugees' reliance on primary providers increases and they fail to recognize, or ignore, the other information resources in the horizon. Nor are they able to establish trustworthy relationships with other providers. By mapping the information horizon of refugees, this paper contributes towards providing a diagram and taxonomy of service providers and their services, thus enabling better coordination among service providers and reducing complexity for refugees and service providers alike. Formal channels of communications can then be established based on this taxonomy so that an improved flow of information can happen between the service providers and with refugees. A further government coordinated and funded initiative is recommended to strengthen information sharing and coordination among the various providers to support and encourage the plethora of programs, ideas and one-off minor initiatives existing on ground.

In conclusion, service providers aim to ensure that settling refugees feel like valued and contributing members of the local society. However, complexities on the horizon produce information barriers which constrain information acquisition and thus participation. Collaboration between individual refugees, service providers and agencies in mapping and simplifying the information horizon is recommended to support refugees in becoming informed and participating citizens.

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