U.S. Media and Migration
Refugee Oral Histories

Sarah C. Bishop
U.S. MEDIA AND MIGRATION

Using oral history, ethnography, and close readings of media, Sarah C. Bishop probes the myriad and sometimes conflicting ways refugees interpret and use mediated representations of life in the United States throughout their resettlement. Guided by 74 refugee narrators from Bhutan, Burma, Iraq, and Somalia, *U.S. Media and Migration* explores answers to questions such as: What does one learn from media about an unfamiliar place? How does media help or hinder refugees’ sense of belonging after relocation? Why and how does the U.S. government use media to shape refugees’ understanding of American norms, standards, and ideals? With insights from refugees and resettlement administrators throughout, Bishop provides a compelling and layered analysis of the interaction between refugees and U.S. media before, during, and long after resettlement.

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# CONTENTS

*List of Tables and Figures*  
*Acknowledgments*  

## Introduction

1. Refugees as Audiences of U.S. Media in Pre-Arrival Contexts  
   - Gaining Access to U.S. Media  28  
   - “The Reality Check”: Sorting Fact from Fiction in Popular U.S. Media  37  
   - Complicating Enculturation through Media  43

2. Refugees’ Use of Media in Pre-Departure Preparation and Orientations  
   - Pre-Departure Overseas Orientations  58  
   - Importance of Visuality in Orientation Media  63  
   - The Relationship between Orientation Content and Context  64  
   - The Power of Orientation Media  67  
   - A Closer Look at One Orientation Text  69  
   - Limited Access to and Disappointment with Orientations and Their Media  84  
   - Relocation Preparation outside of Orientation  88
3 Voluntary and Mandated Media Encounters during Refugees’ First Days in the U.S.
   Navigating “Home”: Making Sense of American Living Arrangements and Media Access 98
   Perspectives on the Importance of Post-Arrival Media Acquisition 104
   Expectations Meet Reality during the First Days of Living in the United States 109
   Post-Arrival Orientations and Orientation Media 116
   The Infallible Helpmate: Government Agency
      Self-Representation in Post-Arrival Contexts 125
   Print Media as a Means to Develop, Standardize, and Ensure Fulfillment of Post-Arrival Orientation 129
   Post-Arrival Media Facilitates Deprivatization 131

4 Media and Refugees’ Ongoing Resettlement
   Media about Refugees in the United States 144
   Refugees in U.S. News 145
   Refugees and Americans Respond to News about Refugees in the United States 151
   Media, Language, and Religion 164
   Media, Friends, and Family 169

Conclusion 180

Appendix 185
References 187
Index 207
# Tables and Figures

## Tables

0.1 New refugee arrivals in fiscal year 2012 by four top nations of origin 9
0.2 Affiliated organizations and interview details 10
0.3 Incoming refugees by top-four states in fiscal years 2010–2012 12

## Figures

2.1 Cultural orientation in Thailand 59
2.2 Still taken from “Welcome to the United States” 61
2.3 An instructional diagram on the door of a bathroom at a refugee camp in Nepal 65
2.4 Orientation attendees watch a film at the Dadaab camp in Kenya 66
2.5 Refugees respond to a question during pre-departure orientation 71
2.6 Page 40 of the *Guidebook for Refugees* orientation text 80
2.7 Page 226 of the *Guidebook for Refugees* orientation text 81
3.1 Page 145 of the *Guidebook for Refugees* orientation text 108
3.2 Page 149 of the *Guidebook for Refugees* orientation text 117
3.3 Page 26 of YMCA Houston’s *Reception and Placement* orientation text 118
3.4 Page 15 of YMCA Houston’s *Reception and Placement* orientation text 119
3.5 Page 53 of YMCA Houston’s *Reception and Placement* orientation text 122
3.6 Page 143 of *Making Your Way* orientation text 126
3.7 Page 277 of *Making Your Way* orientation text 127
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The United States accepts around sixty thousand immigrants with refugee status each year. These “forced migrants” fled or were driven from their homes because of some social, political, or natural threat to their safety. While some refugees know a good deal about the United States when they arrive, many have moved directly from refugee camps that often lacked access to television, the Internet, and other mass media. When refugees arrive in the United States, they not only confront a new nation about which they may have limited prior knowledge but also a media-saturated environment in which successful orientation and resettlement depends on their ability to engage with such media. Because refugees throughout their relocation process need to interact with U.S.-made films, television, and news, as well as with U.S.-government-produced print matter, to help them navigate their new environment, studying such encounters offers a previously underdeveloped perspective of media’s role in refugees’ lived experiences and, more broadly, of U.S. media’s variable capacity to provide crucial information to these individuals.

This book looks into the ways refugees use and interpret multiple forms of U.S. media throughout their long-term relocation. With the aid of firsthand perspectives provided by seventy-four oral history interviews I conducted with refugees in the United States, as well as twelve interviews with refugee resettlement administrators, I work to answer the following questions: How is relocating refugees’ knowledge about their new host country influenced by their encounters with media from the United States during the relocation process? How does mediated communication help or hinder refugees’ sense of belonging in the United States? What role, if any, do media play in refugees’ attempts to adopt or resist perceived American norms, standards, and ideals? Finally, how do media
produced by local, state, and federal governments shape refugees’ understanding and experiences during relocation, and how do governments attempt to use these media toward particular ends? By analyzing refugees’ encounters with U.S. media before, during, and after their relocation to multiple parts of the United States, this book directly addresses each of these questions.

One cannot gain a thorough view of media’s role in refugee resettlement by considering only the media that refugees encounter before they are displaced; likewise, a view that takes into account only the ways that media and refugees interact post-resettlement would prove too narrow to offer insight about the ways that refugees transition from one nation to another with the impact of pre-resettlement media encounters lingering in their deep memory. For this purpose, this book is organized according to the ways media’s impact unfolds sequentially through three general stages of migration: (1) before long-term resettlement, when refugees’ encounters with U.S. media are determined and limited by the availability of this media within their countries of origin or secondary countries of asylum; (2) during resettlement—that is, immediately before and after relocating to the United States—when much of the U.S. media refugees hear, see, and read is mandated, produced, and disseminated by the U.S. government or governmental organizations during mandated pre-departure and post-arrival orientations; and (3) after resettlement, when, once having settled into the media-saturated United States and gaining more independence from the U.S. government’s direct involvement in their daily lives, refugees’ media engagements diversify according to tastes, desires, and/or academic and professional requirements. As this book demonstrates, the ways refugees use U.S. media in each of these three stages is different from the other two. A chronological format will thus allow for the clearest unfolding of these distinctions, while simultaneously mimicking the sequential narrative arc of the interviews themselves. In short, in this book, I argue that the influence of media on the relocation process is far more wide reaching than is currently on the radar of both media scholars and resettlement professionals, and that studying refugees’ interpretation and negotiation of media can advance understanding of media’s power and limitations in transnational contexts.

The oral history methodology of this book works to counter asymmetries in power and control of the topic by providing an experiential, narrative-driven account. In the heavily mass-mediated United States, self-reports of refugee media use provide insight into a crucial locus of interaction between refugees and their host country. Studying that locus promises to suggest how media-dependent cultural citizenship is imbricated with more conventional government-sponsored pathways to citizenship that have been part of the standard immigration narrative. As a narrative that has become a key fixture of American ideology, the overly positive story of “a nation of immigrants” adapting to abundance (as Andrew Heinze argues in his book of the same title) is challenged by the study of forced migrants’ media use, which shows a much more nuanced and often
conflicted picture of forced migrants’ experiences. Thus, this book sheds new light on the refugee experience in the United States, U.S. media as an avenue of immigrant enculturation, and U.S. state power exercised through media upon forced migrants.

While communication scholars, sociologists, and anthropologists have studied the interaction of media and migration, refugees are often underrepresented in such research because of the diversity of their narratives; their general status as a vulnerable, and transient, population; and the obstacles refugees and scholars face in comprehending each other’s languages. As a result, most of the existing scholarly narratives about media and migration foreground voluntary, rather than forced, immigrant perspectives.

The goal of this book is to advance understanding of refugee interaction with U.S. media while maintaining sight of the heterogeneity of refugees and their narratives. Because refugees in the United States are not a generic, homogenous cultural group, their media experiences are not generalizable but, rather, vary due to factors such as the divergent geographic contexts of their countries of origin and areas of settlement in the U.S. differential exposure to media when growing up, disparate levels of literacy and English-language comprehension, and dissimilar positions on the socioeconomic ladder. To emphasize such heterogeneity, this book (1) employs oral-history-based investigation that eschews standardized questionnaires of a group in favor of open-ended questions that encourage reports of personal and unique experiences; (2) involves people of different social statuses from four distinct refugee-producing nations that represent the largest recent refugee streams into the United States; and (3) adopts a multisited approach involving key cities in the four states that have recently received the greatest numbers of refugees: California, New York, Texas, and Pennsylvania. This research design permits analysis of the many ways that refugee encounters with media may vary by ethnicity, socioeconomic status, area of origin, and area of resettlement.

I am aware that by referring to these four groups according to their nations of origin instead of their ethnicities or some other characteristic that I risk perpetuating the nationalistic nature of refugee research. However, because refugee resettlement is determined and facilitated by nation-states, because the 1951 United Nations Refugee Agency’s very definition of “refugee” utilizes national categorization, and because the refugee narrators were not always explicit about their ethnicities during interviews, I will refer to refugees throughout this book according to their nation of origin. In cases where the narrators mentioned their ethnicity as a salient aspect of their narrative, I have noted it in the text.

This book is based upon the belief that underprivileged, forced migration should receive the same scholarly attention as more privileged forms of migration. The lack of attention in American immigration scholarship to forced migration has normalized the experiences of more privileged migrants, so that
voluntary migrants become the yardstick of invidious distinction against which other migrants are measured. By attending to forced immigration, this book offers to revise the prevailing mythologies concerning immigration that tend to be overly positive, while simultaneously providing insights that may be useful to those who facilitate migration. The objective here is thus both theoretical and pragmatic, and the resulting work should lend scholarly insight into the ways communicative encounters with U.S.-produced media inform refugee relocation and, at the same time, provide useful, pertinent analysis for anyone individuals or groups involved in, or affected by, refugees relocating to the United States.

At the end of one of the first oral history interviews I conducted in early 2013, I asked the participating refugee narrator, Tek Rimal, “Is there anything you would like to tell me that I haven’t asked you about?” I included this question at the end of each interview, and the responses were often fruitful—participants sometimes wanted to clarify something they mentioned earlier, or remembered something they meant to say before. But Tek’s reply was unique. Instead of continuing with his narrative after this prompt, he paused, and then asked simply, “How will your research help refugees?” I set down my notebook. While I had presupposed even in the earliest stages of developing this research that my work would be helpful to those involved in the relocation of refugees, I realized in that moment the gravity of what Tek was asking. He had invited me to interview him in his home that evening after working back-to-back shifts at his two full-time jobs because he trusted that telling his own story might have a tangible, positive effect for others who bear the burden of displacement.

Tek’s question became an imperative for me. I offer these narratives and my analysis in the faith that this work will blur the line that too often separates the academic from the pragmatically useful and ethically sound. Repeating Tek’s question as a mantra at each stage of this work, I pursued this research with academic rigor for the sake of positive social change. I believe that the most valuable contribution of this book will be a richer understanding of the wealth of knowledge to be gained by anyone willing to listen to firsthand—rather than secondhand or presupposed—accounts of media’s role in forced migration.

To investigate the scope of the interaction of refugee migration and media, I have conducted seventy-four oral history interviews with refugees from the top-four nations of origin for recent refugee arrivals in the U.S.—Bhutan, Burma, Iraq, and Somalia—in order to compare and contrast the myriad ways refugees encounter, interpret, and understand mediated representations of life in the United States. In addition to the seventy-four interviews with refugees, I also interviewed twelve refugee resettlement administrators. An oral history methodology entails conducting and recording qualitative, long-form interviews using open-ended questions and has proven germane for my project in that it fostered a firsthand, in-depth view into refugees’ sense of meaning-making about their mediated perceptions of relocation. My interviews took place
in the four leading states of residence for refugees admitted to the United States in 2012: Texas, California, New York, and Pennsylvania. In addition, I completed close readings and visual/textual analysis of several relevant texts that were brought to my attention by the participating narrators. Finally, in this book, I call upon my observation of the several refugee classes, orientations, and other refugee-related meetings I attended in order to analyze the ways these meetings’ visual, oral, and written components inform refugee resettlement. In the following pages, I discuss each of these three methods in detail.

The oral history method I used throughout this project allowed firsthand, refugee voices to guide the research in a way that standardized questionnaires could not. Refugees’ resettlement experiences are permeated on all fronts with mediated representations of America, nationalism, patriotism, and, sometimes, xenophobia. But the ways refugees interpret or use these media vary widely. For this reason, it is imperative to my project that the narrators were able to testify, in their own words, to their own unique experiences.

The Oral History Association (OHA) explains that oral history “refers both to a method of recording and preserving oral testimony and to the product of that process.” Through dialogic exchange, oral histories traverse ground unavailable via other methodologies by creating inimitable environments for individual reflections on highly personal narratives, and by providing a means for the recording and storage of voices that may otherwise not be preserved. Sherna Gluck suggests that oral history allows researchers to gather underrepresented histories by “challenging the traditional concepts of history, of what is ‘historically important,’ and...affirming that our everyday lives are history.” This methodology is overseen and internally governed by the OHA, established in 1966, which “seeks to bring together all persons interested in oral history as a way of collecting and interpreting human memories to foster knowledge and human dignity.” The genesis of contemporary oral history has been attributed to the post-World War II “renaissance of memory as a source for ‘people’s history,’ ” and has undergone several transformations and incarnations since that time, but the role of individual narrations of history has remained consistently central and valuable to the philosophy of this work. Scholars from multiple disciplines employ an oral history methodology, and it exists in communication and media studies as one of many methods of research. The foundational assumptions of this technique include the belief that some personalized, historical knowledge cannot be gained quantitatively, but only through a process of open-ended reflection and the recovery of memory in which the researcher does not anticipate the responses of the participant prior to the interview. The resulting findings are both unanticipated and not reproducible, because they are allowed to emerge organically throughout the interview instead of through predetermined research questions and hypotheses. Because oral history is a methodology of experience, one that should not anticipate its findings before
the interviews take place, researchers must guard against the tendency to give
priority to only what they suspect they will find or to ask leading questions in
hopes of confirming what they already assume is true. The philosophy of oral
history privileges the narrators’ accounts over the researchers’ presuppositions,
so the responsible interviewer must provide time and opportunity for which-
ever responses a narrator chooses to exhibit. Such a position remains limited,
however, by the reality that the researcher has predetermined which event
to study, which narrators to seek out, and which perspectives to leave out of
the final project. In this way, as renowned oral historian Alessandro Portelli
reminds us, “the control of the historical discourse remains firmly in the hands
of the historian,” and assuming otherwise would provide oral history an impos-
sible advantage over every other kind of historical research. Indeed, just as the
narrator will inevitably include his/her interpretations alongside the account of
history, so will the researcher inevitably interpret his/her findings according to
personal understanding and intent. In this way, throughout an oral history, the
narrator and the interviewer work as partners, collaborating to create a record
of a particular history. Portelli suggests, “oral sources are always the result of a
relationship, a common project in which both the informant and the researcher
are involved, together.” Instead of ignoring this inescapable reality, many oral
historians recommend addressing it head on, taking on a “reflective, critical
approach to memory and history” so that “by reflecting on our practice we
can move toward a more sensitive research methodology.” A
self-reflexive approach can work to keep the narrators’ perspectives more central to oral his-
tory research.

An important distinction exists regarding the unit of study within the oral his-
tory research included in this work. For this project, the unit of study is not some
historical event itself, but rather the memory of a particular time in the narrators’
history. I refer to past events as “histories” instead of “history,” as this minor
semantic change allows for the possibility of multiple or conflicting experiences
around singular past events. Here, the significance lies not in the “reality” that
some event occurred, but rather that the event was experienced by an individual
or group of individuals who responded with highly variable reactions based on
any number of factors. This reality speaks to a viable intersection of oral history
with communication studies.

Contemporary communication theory leans heavily on the dynamic nature of
the self, found in the works of scholars such as Roland Barthes and David Harvey.
Barthes worked to advance the view that every experience is subject to personal
dynamic interpretation called connotation, or, “the imposition of a second mean-
ing.” In this view, no individual can experience an event objectively, because
his/her experience depends highly on contextual and personal factors. Taking this
view further, David Harvey asserts that individuals create meanings that may shift
or change “depending on the situation.” Though a self-proclaimed Marxist,
Harvey rejects the Marxist idea of a coherent self in favor of the notion of the “fragmented” selves that make up each individual and allow for the existence of simultaneous event divergent meanings. Carrying these views into this oral history project allowed me to consider any narrator’s account not as an official or stagnant explanation of “truth,” but as a reality, nonetheless, that is dynamic and situated within a particular temporal and spatial context.

The multisited, multilingual oral history interviews I completed for this work presented some unanticipated challenges that compelled me to maintain a constant view of my own positionality while interviewing. For example, while some of the refugee narrators were well educated and quite comfortable with academic research, others who had little or no history of education were unsure of what academic research was or how it might be used, so I had to spend a good deal of the relatively little time we had together explaining my intentions and affiliations and working through the deed of gift forms—which granted me permission to use the narrators’ words—line-by-line. Some members of the refugee populations living in Texas, California, New York, and Pennsylvania had formal lessons in English before their arrival in the United States, and many had access to extensive free English classes after their arrival. All twelve of the resettlement administrators I interviewed spoke English fluently. Therefore, I was able to conduct about half of the interviews in English. While several of the narrators were happy to speak with me through an interpreter in their native language, others were eager to use their newly acquired language skills and participate in the interview in English with no interpreter present. While I conceded whenever this request was made, I was challenged in a few instances by the mid-interview realization that the narrator and I were having difficulty understanding each other clearly. In these instances, due to the extra time it took to ensure bidirectional understanding, the interviews covered comparatively less ground than others.

The presence of an interpreter did not eradicate difficulty, but instead changed its nature. Throughout this project, I faced questions such as, how can I be sure the interpreter is repeating clearly what the narrators and I have said? How should I proceed when interpreters who are also refugees begin—perhaps due to the informal nature of the interview conversations—to share their own experiences in addition to translating the narrators’? How should one transcribe language that is not grammatically correct, and how should this strategy change when the errors are an interpreter’s rather than a narrator’s? I faced each of these questions several times, and rather than developing a standard protocol by which to handle them, I instead dealt with them on a case-by-case basis that took into account the narrators’ preferences, my own desires, and the interpreters’ willingness and skill.

Especially sensitive in this project was the prevailing reality that many refugees are asked consistently and repeatedly by their case managers or other resettlement personnel to talk with strangers who are often affiliated with the government in some capacity. Refugees’ case managers may require them to meet
with representatives from Health and Human Services, immigration lawyers, state-funded counselors, and other resettlement agency or government personnel at multiple points after their relocation. Whether out of respect for their case managers or an understanding that compliance with case managers’ requests often leads to the availability of aid or resources, I gained the sense during this project that refugees are sometimes willing to agree to a meeting even when they are not entirely sure of its purpose or outcome. Because I worked with refugee case managers to solicit narrators for this project, this realization led me to believe that it was important at the beginning of the interviews to take the time to establish with the narrators that I had no ongoing affiliation with their resettlement agencies, that speaking with me would have no impact on their ability to receive aid or their standing with their resettlement agency, and that their decision to participate could be reversed if they wished. Once I made these qualifications, I was overwhelmed by how many refugee narrators were still eager to tell their stories and often wanted to continue talking even beyond the time we had scheduled for our meeting.

Beyond the aforementioned challenges, there were others that made this project a frustrating but ultimately rewarding venture. For example, some of the narrators did not know their addresses or how to write words other than their names, so that completing the deeds of gift became a multiperson and time-consuming affair. Others did not know the day or year they were born or the names of the places they had lived before they were displaced, so that information that is often standard or easy to obtain in many interviewing projects became cumbersome or impossible in this one. Additionally, interviewing narrators who had sustained bodily torture—many of whom were from Somalia—posed a challenge that was quite the opposite of what I had expected. I knew that it was likely that I would encounter some narrators who had experienced torture; it is all too common in refugee experiences. While I did ask all of the refugee narrators to explain to me their understanding of the reasons they were displaced, I was clear that they did not need to recount memories that may be too painful to revisit. I assumed most would not want to discuss the intricate details of their hardships with a near stranger. Instead, I found that the refugees who had sustained bodily torture were often intent on sharing those parts of their narratives at length during our interviews. In those moments, I felt pulled between my academic concerns and my human ones; the graphic verbal descriptions of rape, murder, and mutilation sometimes rendered me speechless, so that I was unable to or uninterested in maintaining my side of the conversation. Since completing the interviews, I have revisited and wrestled with these survivor narratives repeatedly. Like the narrators, I have sometimes found it difficult to concentrate on the other parts of this research in light of the massive and ongoing reality of violence. In deference to this particular group of narrators and their fervent commitment to making an American researcher aware
of the prevalence of violence in refugees’ pasts, I have attempted to provide as much context as is possible regarding the narrators’ pre- and mid-displacement experiences. Indeed, even when these experiences appeared at first to have no relation at all to refugees’ use and interpretation of media, I often learned well into some interviews that a history of torture has a direct and ongoing effect on the ways refugees function as audiences of media and discuss this revelation in detail at multiple points in this work.

To seek out the narrators for this project, I relied on refugee arrival data from the U.S. Department of State; the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration; and the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System. In fiscal year 2012, 58,179 refugees were admitted to the United States (31,380 men; 26,799 women). Twenty-nine percent of these admissions were from Bhutan (26 percent), Burma (24 percent), Iraq (21 percent), or Somalia (8.4 percent). Table 0.1 reveals the dispersion of newly arriving refugees from these four groups in 2012 across the four states involved in this project.

I interviewed twenty-four Bhutanese refugees, twenty Iraqi refugees, nineteen Somali refugees, and eleven Burmese refugees. In keeping with the Oral History Association’s (2012) guidelines for best practices, I prepared an interview guide of some questions that I asked each narrator. These questions included inquiries such as, “Where were you born?” and “How old are you?” While these questions are standard in oral history research and may be assumed to provoke simple answers; in fact, because many refugees were displaced from their homes when they were quite young and because many have no record of their birth, sometimes the factual answers to these questions were unattainable. For example, about ten of the seventy-four narrators told me they were born on January 1 of some year, which is likely an indication that refugees or resettlement personnel use this date as a default during resettlement processing when refugees are unsure of their birth date. The interview guide evolved during the interviewing stage of this project to include the adaptation or addition of some questions and the removal of others, so that each interview comprised a unique event with its own findings. During each interview, I allowed ample time for any new directions the narrator might lead me. Many times, these new directions arose when narrators’

| TABLE 0.1 New refugee arrivals in fiscal year 2012 by four top nations of origin |
|----------------------------------|----------------|------------|---------|---------|
| Bhutan                          | Burma/Myanmar | Iraq       | Somalia |
| Texas                           | 1,216         | 2,142      | 960     | 456     |
| California                      | 107           | 409        | 2,912   | 238     |
| New York                        | 1,204         | 1,074      | 324     | 411     |
| Pennsylvania                    | 2,166         | 255        | 167     | 23      |
| Total admitted to U.S. in FY 2012 | 15,070      | 14,160     | 12,163  | 4,900   |
responses evoked follow-up questions that led the narrator to discuss additional, unanticipated topics in detail.

I contacted the majority of the narrators in this project through liaisons at the refugee resettlement agencies in each of the four involved states. Additional narrators were recruited by way of the “snowball effect,” wherein narrators recommended I talk with their friends or family members and helped to facilitate meetings with them. In order to gain a fuller grasp on the ways changes in the local culture may have impacted my findings, I interviewed narrators living in two distinct areas within each state: New York City and Buffalo in New York, Los Angeles and San Diego in California, Houston and Austin in Texas, and Pittsburgh and Erie in Pennsylvania. Table 0.2 provides the names and locations of all participating refugee resettlement organizations, the dates of my interviews, and the number of narrators affiliated with each organization.

**TABLE 0.2** Affiliated organizations and interview details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Refugee-Related Organization</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Dates of Interviews</th>
<th>Number of Narrators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International Institute of Erie</td>
<td>Erie, Pennsylvania</td>
<td>February 7, 2013</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Area Multi-Service Center</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania</td>
<td>March 5, 2013, March 22, 2013</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAMBA NYC</td>
<td>New York, New York</td>
<td>June 4, 2013</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Institute of Los Angeles</td>
<td>Los Angeles, California</td>
<td>July 9, 2013, July 11, 2013, July 12, 2013</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journey’s End Refugee Services</td>
<td>Buffalo, New York</td>
<td>August 6, 2013, August 7, 2013</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Institute of Buffalo</td>
<td>Buffalo, New York</td>
<td>August 7, 2013</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YMCA Houston</td>
<td>Houston, Texas</td>
<td>November 13, 2013, November 14, 2013</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multicultural Refugee Coalition</td>
<td>Austin, Texas</td>
<td>November 15, 2013</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Charities</td>
<td>San Diego, California</td>
<td>November 18, 2013</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somali Bantu Association of America</td>
<td>San Diego, California</td>
<td>November 20, 2013, November 21, 2013</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Women’s East African Support Team</td>
<td>San Diego, California</td>
<td>November 21, 2013</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total:** 86 narrators (74 refugees, 12 administrators)
I conducted the interviews either at the agencies with which the narrators were affiliated or in the narrators’ homes, and the interviews lasted approximately fifty minutes on average. I audio recorded each interview using an application on my iPhone or iPad, excluding two interviews where the narrators declined to give permission for such recording. Because some refugees in the United States need to protect their identities for the safety of family members still living in their home countries or country of asylum, five of the narrators preferred that I use a pseudonym to identify them in this work. In these cases, the interviews are cited using the pseudonym as well as the statement “name changed at the narrator’s request.” After the interviews and observations of refugee-related meetings and events were complete, I had approximately sixty-three hours of recorded material. I indexed the recordings by dividing their content into themes of media interaction before and after relocation and employed professional transcriptionists to transcribe twenty-two selected interviews that I selected on the basis of relevancy to the project’s themes. I transcribed selected parts of the other interviews myself.

While I have addressed some errors and omissions in the transcripts by providing brackets for clarity of reading, I have not invisibly corrected refugees’ or translators’ grammar when they are quoted in this book. For example, a narrator’s quote in chapter 2 appears as “my dream and [what] I faced so different.” The original transcriptions of the interviews are verbatim and include vocalized pauses, false starts, and other nonverbal utterances. Because none of the refugee narrators spoke English as a first language, and because several of the refugee narrators preferred to speak with me in English, many times they would use vocalized pauses, such as “um,” “ahh,” or “you know,” as they searched for a word or confirmed my understanding. In this book, I have removed many of these nonverbal utterances for two reasons: (1) because the utterances were sometimes the interpreters’ rather than the narrators’ and (2) for the sake of brevity and clarity.

I chose the four geographic sites for this project not only because they provided access to the greatest number of refugees but also because (1) they represent the four regions of the United States: West Coast, East Coast, North, and South; (2) a USCRI-sponsored refugee resettlement agency exists in each; (3) the directors of refugee resettlement at the four respective USCRI-sponsored agencies volunteered to facilitate the project by reaching out to narrators and facilitating interpreters; and (4) each of the four house large populations of Burmese, Bhutanese, Iraqi, and Somali refugees. Table 0.3 reveals the numbers of all incoming refugees to these top four states for resettlement in fiscal years 2010, 2011, and 2012.

Throughout this work, I use the insights I gained from the oral history interviews I conducted to take up the methodology of close reading and criticism of several pieces of print, video, and digital media. My goal, as it relates to the
examination of these media, is not to suggest that the texts hold meaning in and of themselves, but rather to explore the ways they promote certain versions of reality while concealing others. In order to avoid a viewing of these media as isolated, finite pieces of information, I examine the texts situationally and contextually, considering the varieties of ways they may appear within, and interact with, refugees’ lives.

Rhetorical criticism is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of language and power that recognizes the ability of communication to facilitate the advancement of knowledges and realities, and recognizes that discourse acts not only as a carrier of ideology but also as a social action in and of itself. Taking up a mandate of close attention to both language and context, rhetorical criticism involves examination of implicit and explicit strategies in language and visual artifacts, and considers critically how these strategies may provide insights into relationships of power and truth production. By utilizing rhetorical criticism to examine the ways truth is created, negotiated, and/or maintained in any text or talk, one can gain a better understanding of the ways the production of these “truths” affect the lived realities of individuals.

In the parts of this work that utilize close readings of media and rhetorical criticism, I take up Sonja K. Foss’s notion of ideological criticism, which recognizes that “evaluative beliefs” are encoded into rhetorical (and, in this case, mass-mediated) messages that “serve as the foundation for knowledge, attitudes, [and] motives.” By homing in on the implicit ideologies that appear in mass media, I am able to tease out the discourses of power and knowledge that run like a current through the kinds of media that refugees encounter before, during, and after their arrival in the United States.

While the critical analysis of talk and text is a prevalent methodology in communication studies generally, its use in examinations of artifacts relating to migration media specifically has been limited. In light of this, my decision to focus on individual artifacts (instead of whole genres or groups of related artifacts) in each of the chapters that employ critical analysis is based on Michael Billig’s view that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Incoming Refugees FY 2010</th>
<th>Incoming Refugees FY 2011</th>
<th>Incoming Refugees FY 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>7918</td>
<td>5627</td>
<td>5905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>8577</td>
<td>4987</td>
<td>5167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>4559</td>
<td>3529</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>2632</td>
<td>2972</td>
<td>2809</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
at an early stage in an area’s theoretical development, a single case study can be especially useful . . . Whilst no claims for sample representativeness can be made from a single case study, it is hoped that in-depth analysis can reveal features and complexities, which have a wider generality.33

This approach has allowed me to examine a handful of key texts with a good deal of detail rather than including superficial reviews of an indiscriminate amount of media.

Because refugees encounter a wide range of media throughout their relocation, and because refugees’ encounters with media vary depending on area of origin, number of years spent in a secondary country of asylum before arriving in the United States, age, language skill, interest, and other factors, I followed the lead of the narrators in deciding which media to analyze. When a particular piece of media was mentioned during an interview, I asked the narrators to describe their memory of the media. After the interview, I would read, watch, or listen to the media myself in order to complete an analysis of its style, format, and content. This process was complicated by the fact that in several cases, narrators could not recall the names of the films, books, television shows, or websites to which they referred. Though these instances prevented me from being able to analyze these unnamed pieces of media myself, I still include the narrators’ descriptions of them in several parts of this book. Refugees’ descriptions of unnamed media reinforce the significance of the lingering yet partial impact of media on audiences.

At several of the locations involved in this project, I had the opportunity to observe and/or participate in meetings and events at refugee-related organizations. These events served several purposes in this project. First, they allowed me to become familiar with the daily goings on and structure of refugee resettlement agencies and other refugee-related organizations. Second, they provided me with an opportunity to meet and network with refugees and resettlement administrators. Third, they gave me a firsthand view of the ways that refugee-related organizations acquire, display, and disseminate media. In some cases, such as when I attended an English as a Second Language class for newly arrived refugees affiliated with Journey’s End Refugee Services in Buffalo, New York, my role was merely observational. I sat to the side of the class taking notes and photographs. In other cases, such as when I attended a board meeting of resettlement staff at the YMCA in Houston, Texas, I was asked to share my goals, findings, and/or recommendations, and thus acted as both observer and participant.34 The meetings and events I attended varied in purpose, attendance, length, and format. Beyond the English as a Second Language class and board meeting I mentioned earlier, I attended a formal refugee orientation in Pittsburgh, a monthly community meeting of the San Diego Refugee Council, and a yearly digital webinar about the current state of pre-departure orientations delivered by the Cultural
Orientation Resource Center. In addition to these formal events, I was also given the chance to tour and photograph the twelve refugee-related organizations that cooperated with me in my research and to enjoy several afternoon teas and meals with refugees and resettlement staff in multiple locations. While I do not write at length about every one of these experiences in the following pages, I cannot overemphasize how integral they were to this work. The opportunity to attend these formal and informal meetings and events in the four states involved in this project provided context, background knowledge, and perspective for each of the following chapters.

I do not presume that my attendance at the aforementioned events and venues has provided me with a complete view of refugee resettlement. Rather, I am keen to agree with James Clifford, who emphasizes that any participant/observer must address the issue of cultural representation directly, recognizing that any interpretation of a place or event is contestable and contingent on the researcher’s beliefs, values, and preferences. I am aware that resettlement personnel invited me to some events and not to others, and that the set of refugee-related organizations that I contacted are not representative of all of the others. My goal in observing or participating in these events was not to predict or provide generalizations about the behavior of any certain group or culture but rather to gain context for my project with attention to detail and meaning.

This book is divided into four chapters, followed by a brief conclusion: Chapter 1 investigates the ways refugees interpret the U.S. media that they encounter long before their arrival in the United States and how they may understand these media as representations or distortions of the reality of life in the United States. Moreover, the first chapter considers how these media may affect refugees’ decisions to apply for resettlement to the United States and any apprehension or anticipation related to those decisions. In chapter 2, the narrators discuss the types of digital, print, and video media they were given during the weeks and months leading up to their relocation, in United Nations’ mandated pre-departure cultural orientations, and/or in personal preparations for resettlement. I analyze the ways this new knowledge informs refugees’ move to the United States by providing detailed analysis of the most widely used pre-departure orientation text, titled, *Welcome to the United States: A Guidebook for Refugees*, and by chronicling and analyzing the media that refugees may encounter outside of these orientations in personal preparations for their relocation. In the third chapter, I inquire into the realm of learning and experience by concentrating on refugees’ first days in the United States. Specifically, because refugees carry impressions and memories of pre-arrival media with them into the United States, chapter 3 provides instances in which the narrators compare what they learned in pre-arrival media encounters about
the United States to the reality of their experiences upon resettlement. This chapter also discusses refugees’ acquisition of media technology after their arrival in the United States and the varying degrees of importance this acquisition had for the narrators. Additionally, chapter 3 considers how local resettlement organizations in the United States use print and digital media in an attempt to guide refugees through their first days after relocation and how these post-arrival orientation media represent the United States government, act as a means of standardization, and foster the imposition of governmental control into the realms of health, hygiene, and family. The fourth and final chapter turns to consider the ways refugees use media in processes of ongoing resettlement after they have completed their post-arrival orientations and after their contact with their resettlement agencies begins to wane. Here the narrators interpret instances in which members of their community are portrayed in U.S. media and how these portrayals affect their sense of belonging in the United States or their knowledge about Americans’ perceptions of refugees. I undertake a close reading of several such media to reveal how messages regarding belonging and/or nationalism are embedded within the texts’ style, language, and format. The conclusion offers a discussion of the implications of this research, recommendations for resettlement personnel, and suggestions for future study. The chronological format in which this work appears attempts to maintain a narrative arc that mimics the sequential manner of the accounts provided by the narrators as well as the chronological progression of refugee resettlement itself.

I believe this work accomplishes several tasks, and the usefulness of each will depend on the readers’ expectations and desires. First and foremost, this work provides firsthand accounts from the top four incoming refugee groups as they describe, in their own words, the role of media in the progression and trials of resettlement. The narratives work to undercut the perception—evident across U.S. news and entertainment media—of refugees as a faceless wave of helpless outcasts by demonstrating the ways they constantly employ agency and determination even in the midst of forced migration to critically engage their new home. This work challenges those who believe that all refugees wish to come to the United States or that they are all satisfied once they arrive.

This work reveals the differences that exist within the refugee community in terms of its range of interests in and uses of media, contentedness with life after resettlement, willingness to enculturate, and multiple other social and personal variables. Moreover, this book allows for a consideration of the ways popular media—such as films, television shows, or newspaper articles—may inform refugees’ expectations about a future destination and, in turn, how these expectations impact refugees’ integration into U.S. cultures after their arrival. In this way, this book provides a space for the continued future questioning of media’s
(in)ability to affect a group of people in a particular way and for a consideration of the multitude of responses a single piece of media may incite in a group whose members share some external circumstances in common. Indeed, an exploration of refugees’ media encounters may inform current popular and scholarly knowledge about intercultural integration and the role of media in transnational migration more generally. Finally, this book questions the benefits and detriments of government deprivatization in refugees’ lives by offering narrators’ responses to the multiple criteria for success laid out in government media. It paves the way for continued future study of the multiple kinds of government media produced for and disseminated to immigrants, both voluntary and forced.

This project reflects a slice in time. Individuals from other parts of the world have already begun to surpass the groups included here in numbers of incoming refugees. Moreover, advances in the international availability and affordability of media technologies may render obsolete some of the kinds of media I discuss in the coming pages. As a result of the unpredictability of war, famine, natural disasters, governmental regulations, and economics, refugee resettlement will always be subject to unforeseen fluctuations. Thus, the reader should not consider the project contained in these pages a long-standing, determinate statement on the welfare of refugees in the United States, but rather a partial, temporal view into the ways seventy-four refugees described their interactions with media throughout their resettlement. While these seventy-four narratives represent just a fraction of the current refugee population in the United States, their significance should not be minimized. These voices reveal the hope, fear, curiosity, and frustration that refugees’ encounters with media provoke and open a view into the fascinating intersection of media and resettlement.

When I set out on this project in January 2013, I simply wanted to understand more about how incoming refugees’ knowledge about the culture, norms, and values of their eventual U.S. destinations were formed and negotiated through engagements with media during the relocation process. But as I met with and talked to refugees in New York, California, Texas, and Pennsylvania, I slowly came to see the complexity of my question. This book is the result of asking questions with surprising answers. It is the manifestation of a pursuit driven by curiosity, determination, and some very patient refugees. Along the way, my understanding of the potential and limitations of media has been, in turn, questioned, dismantled, rebuilt, and negotiated. I don’t suppose that the view into refugees use of media that this book provides will make the plight of forced migrants any less precarious, but I do suppose that by listening to the voices included here, readers may gain a view into the powers that act on resettlement from all sides, as well as the determined creative agency refugees must summon to withstand the dire process of resettlement.
Notes

1 The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines forced migration as migration “in which an element of coercion exists, including threats to life and livelihood, whether arising from natural or man-made causes” (See http://www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/about-migration/key-migration-terms-1.html#Forced-migration). While refugees are sometimes referred to as “involuntary migrants” in popular and scholarly discourse, some have charged that this term does not allow for a recognition of refugees’ agency or desire to leave their homes when those homes are under threat from unwanted political, social, or natural forces (see, for example, Alden Speare, “The Relevance of Models of Internal Migration for the Study of International Migration, in G. Tapinos, ed., International Migration: Proceedings of a Seminar on Demographic Research in Relation to International Migration (Buenos Aires: CICRED, 1974); Samir Amin, Modern Migrations in Western Africa (London: Oxford University Press, 1974); and William Peterson, “A General Typology of Migration,” American Sociological Review 23, no. 3 (1958): 256–66. This book will provide multiple examples of the varying degrees of choice present in refugee migration, and supports the IOM’s suggestion that “Population mobility is probably best viewed as being arranged along a continuum ranging from totally voluntary migration, in which the choice and will of the migrants is the overwhelmingly decisive element encouraging people to move, to totally forced migration, where the migrants are faced with death if they remain in their present place of residence.” Graeme Hugo, Migration, Development and Environment (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2008): 16.


6 Tek Rimal, interview by Sarah Bishop, Pittsburgh, March 18, 2013, archived at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University.

7 Burma is also known as Myanmar. For the sake of consistency, and alignment with my narrators’ preference, I will refer to this nation throughout this work as Burma.

8 At the University of Pittsburgh, oral histories are excluded from IRB oversight as outlined in a 2004 agreement between the IRB and Pitt’s Communication Department. In light of this exclusion, my own research methods follow the “Principles and Best Practices of the Oral History Association” (2009), http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/.


15 Ibid., 103.


20 Ibid., 53.

21 See the deed of gift in Appendix A.


23 Ibid., 3.


25 http://www.mediascribe.us/

26 According to the Department of Homeland Security, Texas, California, New York, and Pennsylvania were the four leading states of residence of refugees admitted to the United States in FY 2012. See Table 0.3.
27 Kheir Mugwaneza at Northern Area Ministries in Pittsburgh, Marc Fallon at CAMBA in New York City, Lisa Guitguit at YMCA Houston, and Lilian Alba at the International Institute of Los Angeles.


30 Ibid., 239.


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