Rural Media Spaces: Communication Geography on New Terrain

By Magnus Andersson & André Jansson

From Simmel to the Chicago School and all the way to the current field of urban studies, cities have been at the centre of social and cultural theory. The emphasis on cities is particularly salient in the globalization discourse, where a number of books describe the increased significance of mega-cities in geo-political and politico-economic terms (e.g. Harvey 1990; Castells 1996; Sassen 2001), as well as in cultural terms (e.g. Zukin 1995; Massey 2007). Furthermore, the related field dealing with creativity and creative industries revolves around the city (Florida 2005; Hartley 2005). In addition to cities, the media, or rather information and communication technology, holds a prominent position in globalization discourse. Above all, there are two aspects of the media that are regularly attended to. The first regards the media's ability to connect and sustain networks, which certainly has increased with the digital development. This view is also an important foundation of the abovementioned theories of Castells, Harvey and Sassen. The second aspect has to do with the new significance of representation, image and symbolic value, resulting in phenomena such as place branding and urban cultural scenes (e.g. Lynch 1960; Blum 2003; Highmore 2005). These two aspects have led to certain intersections between urban studies and media studies, very often via the theories of Henri Lefebvre (Graham 2004; Jansson 2005).

Still, an important set of questions remains mostly unanswered: What happens to the places beyond cities in the processes of globalization and mediatization? What happens to rural spaces and rural societies in terms of connectivity, representation and, subsequently, social significance? How does "the rural", in turn, affect the very same processes? These questions have been dealt with within the tradition of rural studies but only to a certain extent. Notions such as "the global countryside" (e.g. Woods 2007) and "rural gentrification" (e.g. Phillips 2004) have set an agenda for studying the interconnectedness of rural spaces. Yet although rural studies is a transdisciplinary research field dominated by sociologists, geographers and ethnologists, perspectives on mediatization are rather absent, except from more general references to network society (Murdoch 2006) and arguments about the significance of representation predominantly in relation to the rural idyll (Bell 2006) and to the meaning of place (Halfacree 1993). Similarly, within media studies, there are examples of studies which illuminate the relationship between the media and the rural, for example, the infrastructural aspects of bridging places or the democratic meaning of media in rural societies (Green 1998; Bakardijeva 2008; Hansen 2008). In addition, a more general "spa-

tial turn" within media studies has been recognized by several scholars (e g Falkheimer and Jansson 2006; Morley 2000, 2006), demanding more thorough and systematized explorations of "media space" (Couldry & McCarthy 2004).

These complementary viewpoints indicate a potential research agenda for "rural media spaces" – an agenda that we think corresponds to the emerging subfield of communication geography. The potential of this subfield, which is concerned with the dual question of how communication produces space and how space produces communication, has been recognized within media studies (Falkheimer and Jansson 2006; Jansson 2007) as well as geography (Adams 2009). In accordance with these ambitions, this thematic section of *Culture Unbound* is thus an attempt to bring together an interdisciplinary group of scholars and provide a common ground for research on the relationship between mediation, mediatization and rurality in the global era.[1]

Epistemological Points of Departure

In an account of the development of rural studies, Michael Woods (2005: 17-25) depicts a slow but steady transformation from a tradition firmly based on empirical investigation into a "critical rural social science" anchored in conceptual theories, which are primarily derived from political economy and the general cultural turn within social science. This is not an unfamiliar story among media scholars, whose discipline has undergone a fairly similar development. While the sources of theoretical inspiration have multiplied as the media have gained an increasingly comprehensive social status, the media, as a multifaceted phenomenon, have also attained a central position within the cultural turn. Within the context of "rural media spaces", in our interpretation, the cultural approach (derived from the cultural turn) implies a focus on the interdependence between the settings, practices and experiences of rural everyday life, on the one hand, and the global conditions of socio-spatial restructuring, on the other. This dualistic focus is integral to all the articles of this particular section, including analyses ranging from the everyday responses to rural governance and infrastructural policies to more ephemeral matters of spatial imagination.

The very notion of "rural media space" can be conceived of through Henri Lefebvre's (1974/1991) triadic model of spatial production, which includes *perceived space*, *conceived space* and *lived space*. These three realms are inseparable as they define the particular interplay between socio-material preconditions, representational patterns and imaginary structures within the production of a certain space and place. Appropriated within the problem area of rural media studies, these realms can be approached through the concepts of *connectivity*, *representation* and *imagination*. In combination, they provide a composite understanding of the contested nature of rural media spaces, which in turn relates to the overarching question of whether (and at what levels) "the rural" is subject to marginalization

or integration. While all six articles of this thematic section deal with the triadic interplay advanced by Lefebvre, they follow diverse analytical paths, focusing on different sides of the interplay depending on their object of study. While the imaginary realm of rural (and urban) ideologies, myths, and phantasmagoria saturates all articles as a kind of intermediary mental landscape, the structure of the section can be described as a movement from connectivity to representation.

Connectivity

Connectivity, to start with, is about the infrastructure of network society. Seeing the advantages of being part of the evolving networks and enabling an ever-expanding amount of practices to be conducted from "anywhere" are easy for rural areas. Digital networks may bring people in rural areas closer to urban nodes and the economic and cultural centres. In addition, communication technologies provide opportunities for teleworking and other forms of professional activities at a distance. In a political sense, the digital ICT networks may contribute to an expansion of the sphere of civic participation and political activism, that is, the foundation of dynamic public spheres. However, in spite of these potentials for spatial emancipation and rural participation, there are tendencies that new communication networks, in fact, boost the acceleration and extension of the urbanization processes and thereby strengthen the urban-rural divide. One must at least conclude that the development is uneven as it depends on a broad range of inter-related social, economic and cultural factors and turns certain rural areas into winners while others into losers.

The first two articles, "Imagining Rural Audiences in Remote Western Australia" by Lelia Green and "Supernetwork on the Praire: The Discursive Framing of Broadband Connectivity by Policy Planners and Rural Residents in Alberta, Canada" by Maria Bakardjieva and Amanda Williams, are about the implementation of new communication infrastructure in rural areas. The first article discusses the social impact of a number of infrastructural developments, from telephone services to satellite television. It uses interview data from qualitative field-work carried out among rural citizens and compares their experiences with institutional visions of connectivity. The second article analyzes a particular process of technological implementation, that of the semi-commercial SuperNet, from the viewpoint of both provincial government and industry policy planners and rural residents. Although the articles deal with different media technologies in different parts of the world, they encompass striking similarities. Both articles highlight the discrepancy between how policy-makers and residents envision connectivity. (Urban) policy-makers in both Alberta and Western Australia deemed their infrastructural projects able to bring a lifeline of connectivity to marginalized communities, able to open a window to the world, and able to break isolation. The residents, however, had other expectations. They wanted connectivity in order to

facilitate, and not to transform, their rural lifestyles. Moreover, they wanted communication technology in the name of spatial equality.

The two articles thus illustrate the ubiquitous political dimension of the urban-rural divide, which is present even in seemingly non-political questions such as infrastructure. While "urban" imaginations of the countryside are indubitably not unitary, they tend to be different from rural ones, largely following what Tim Cresswell (2006) calls a dominant "metaphysic of flow". And as the case studies from Alberta and Western Australia suggest, politics and policies are predominantly based upon the urban(ized) imagination of the countryside. Getting access to new means of connectivity may even work as a reminder of these dominant distinctions, as shown particularly in Green's article.

A fairly similar argument is put forward in the third article: "Mediatization, Spatial Coherence and Social Sustainability: The Role of Digital Media Networks in a Swedish Countryside Community" by André Jansson. Analyzing qualitative interview data, Jansson argues that under rural conditions global communication networks contribute to the integration and sustainability of the community as much as to processes of expansion and differentiation. This tendency partly stems from the implications of connectivity as such. Through their capacity of linking people to external realms of interest, while simultaneously reinforcing people's sense of belonging in the local community, online media promote ontological security at the individual level. But the tendency also stems from representational processes and people's experience of spatial coherence. As the interview data show, connectivity is turned into a symbolic and narrative asset for the local community as a whole. Jansson's article thus points to the linkages between connectivity and representation in the making of rural spaces.

Representation

As indicated above, imaginations of "the rural" versus "the urban" are an essential aspect of (geo)politics and the (re-)production of the rural. They saturate a broad range of spatial representations (Lefebvre's conceived space), everything from regional development plans to popular media content, integrating more or less ideological undercurrents. With the exception of local newspapers and certain forms of local broadcasting, the mass media has been an urban affair to a considerable degree. Slightly exaggerated, these dominant media forms can be seen as mediated urban events produced by urban people in urban areas for audiences that are, if not urban, at least willing to engage with urban(ized) matters. In the 1970s, Berger et al. (1973: 65-67), referred to this condition as the "urbanization of consciousness" – a process that allegedly operates in tandem with the mythological construction of the urban as "the mediated centre" (Couldry 2003). Still, this is, and has to be, a dual perspective. It implies that rural matters or areas are being dealt with within the dominant urban perspective, which involves a mythologization of the rural – whether a romantic idyll or a rigid backwater – in terms of "the

anti-urban" (Cloke 1997; Fish 2005; Cruickshank 2009). New means of production and distribution, such as web based media, however, hold a potential to promote a do-it-yourself culture, hence opening up opportunities for alternative representations of the countryside. Village communities, petty producers and municipalities may produce images and texts about life in their environments and form online communities and networks in addition to commercial outlets of various kinds. As demonstrated in Jansson's and Bakardjieva and Williams' studies, these new means of self-representation may diverge from the overarching urban ideology of network society, sustaining residual cultures as well as rural cultural complexity.

The last three articles of this special section deal precisely with the construction and negotiation of rural representations and the ideological struggles involved in these processes. Magnus Andersson's "Provincial Globalization: The Local Struggle of Place-Making", discusses the encoding and decoding processes involved in the implementation of spatial strategies in a Swedish municipality. Having interviewed both local policy-makers and inhabitants, Andersson shows how local symbolic strategies are marked by the global discourse of urbanism. This is particularly salient in municipal policy-makers' attitudes towards place branding and policy networks, which they envisage as self-evident components of rural development and future. The inhabitants, on the contrary, crave less rhetoric and more investments in public facilities and services, facilities that should be both scattered and small-scale for present and future inhabitants. This demarcation, Andersson argues, may be conceptualised as a conflict between the "urbanization of the rural" and the "re-ruralization of the rural".

In the subsequent article, "Reporting an Unsettled Countryside: The News Media and Rural Protests in Britain", Michael Woods analyzes a site of "rural production" that has not been much studied previously: British newspapers. Woods investigates how a number of newspapers represented rural protests related to hunting and farm incomes during 1997-2007, and how these representations were related to rural campaign efforts. The main argument is that during this period, the homogenous "unsettled" image of the countryside was altered to a more complex set of viewpoints informed by the ideologies of different newspapers. The study highlights the crucial role of the media in framing rural events, discursively constructing the dominant image of rurality. It also indicates that as the amount of coverage increases and rural matters enter the news agenda, a more composite understanding is more likely to evolve. By relating Woods' findings to the abovementioned discussions of online media, one finds clear reasons to investigate further into how converging modes of self-representation and co-production may affect dominant encodings of the countryside.

The problem of rural cliché images is also addressed in the last article, albeit from a more-theory driven perspective, which focuses on how dominant metaphors may actually open up for alternative readings of the rural. In "Reading

Rural Consumption Practices for Difference: Bolt-holes, Castles and Life-rafts", Keith Halfacree unveils the internal complexity of three metaphors (those mentioned in the title) that can be used for labelling different styles of rural consumption. Consumption is understood here as both the consumption, or reading, of representations, and the practical enactment and reproduction of rural representations through consumption. Chiefly following Gibson-Graham's (2006) alternative strategy of "reading for difference rather than dominance," Halfacree depicts an image of the rural as heterotopic. This means, for instance, that the notion of the rural as a "life-raft" – as articulated through practices such as second home consumption – does not merely represent an escape from a dysfunctional (urban) "rest of the world". As shown by empirical studies of second home ownership, the "life-raft" is not an isolated entity and must, instead, be understood as an integral, and potentially transformative, component of the home as such, part of what Halfacree calls "dynamic heterolocalism".

Integration or Marginalization? The Mediation of Distance and Difference

What emerges from the studies compiled in this section of *Culture Unbound* is a rather contradictory view of "rural media spaces". These spaces are on the one hand, dominated by urban(izing) modes of connectivity and representation, in which "the rural" constitutes the normative and mythological "other". On the other hand, it is shown that rural spaces attain a great deal of internal complexity and transgression. What kind of argument may be derived from these observations? The most important point is to acknowledge the diverse and multilayered role of *mediation* – the constitutive process of rural media spaces.

By its very definition, mediation is about linking and the bringing together of people, places and ideas, which may occur – as discussed above – through technological or representational means or both (Fornäs 2000). But that various entities are linked together does not necessarily imply that the distances and differences between these entities are abolished. As shown by several studies, the opposite may just as well occur, meaning that the increased connectivity between "rural peripheries" and "urban centres" may lead to an accentuated awareness of pre-existing socio-material differences and distances between the city and the countryside (Green). Consequently, it leads to an increased engagement with what is conceived of as typically rural matters (Bakardjieva and Williams). From the rural viewpoint, therefore, the politico-technological promise of participation and integration is also the promise of autonomy and separation. Seen from another reading position, however, it may also be the threat of dominance, alienation and marginalization. The dual implication of "the problem of the last mile" is an interesting case in point here since this infrastructural problem, as it mutates into a problem of representation and identity, may not only foster experiences of mar-

ginalization but also catalyze substantial participatory efforts in order to diminish distance (Jansson).

Here, the articles by Woods and Halfacree provide important illustration of the contested relationship between the urban and the rural. The articles demonstrate that there is always a discursive space for alternative representations and (re)readings, whether in relation to dominant media channels or more specialized domains, as well as an inherent subversive potential within everyday consumption practices to destabilize the urban-rural divide. An understanding of the rural as heterotopic seems essential in this context since it holds that the rural is not only "something else" or "something different" from the urban but also a realm of internal differences that may separate or unite the rural and the urban through mediation. It is important to stress that mediation must be envisioned in much broader terms than matters of "the media". Mediation indicates that images and understandings are not only represented but also enacted and negotiated through institutional processes as well as everyday practices. The complexity and, therefore, relatively unpredictable nature of these processes are also demonstrated in the articles by Andersson (local governance) and Bakardjieva and Williams (infrastructural development project), which point to an additional type of distance interwoven with the urban-rural divide, namely that between rural residents and institutional actors such as spatial policy-makers and entrepreneurs.

In addition to symbolic mediation processes there are also other flows and mobilities with relevance to the tension field between rural integration and marginalization, for example the mobility of people. Mobilities are generally of central concern for understanding contemporary society (c.f. Urry 2001: ch. 3); obviously, the flows of chiefly middle class people from the cities to the countryside (counter-urbanization) are significant to the urban-rural divide, as are the flows of most young people in the other direction: from the rural to the urban. Although much wider than the field of communication geography, the perspective is intriguing since different forms of mobility may intersect in different ways. For example, whilst media culture might inspire various kinds of movements, itinerant people can also be expected to have a particular relationship to mediated mobility. The intersection of these flows is a theme that is implicitly present in several of the articles (see Jansson, in particular). Accordingly, mobility as a phenomenon – and as a perspective (Cresswell 2006) – further accentuates the complexity and heterogeneity of the rural partly through the travelling of people, partly through mediations, and partly through the interplay between them.

Many complexities and contradictions are unveiled in this theme section; however, what also stands out as a common denominator and key argument is the hegemonic status of the urban-rural dichotomy. Whether we discuss questions of infrastructural development programmes or modes of representation, the spaces in-between, whatever these are, tend to evaporate. According to Halfacree in his article, as the rural constitutes "the other" to the urban, it also becomes something

that is somehow inherent to urban self-identity, whether as an escape or a threat. In addition, the same thing goes for rural appropriations of the city. One may thus argue that the (gentrified) inner city and the countryside are bridged by a spatial hegemony, leaving, for example, suburbs and small towns behind (see also Phillips 2004). The aesthetic dimension of the link can be traced to the aesthetic logic of reflexive modernity with its "econom[y] of signs and space" (Lash and Urry 1994), in which the residuals of former epochs are appropriated and converted to new means. The urban factory (modernity) is turned into an arty café, and the old rural barn (pre-modernity) is refashioned into a second home. As a key figure in the contemporary reflexive modernity stands the creative entrepreneur who thrives in both settings but not often in-between. An indication of the ideological penetration of this entrepreneurial imagination is salient in Bakardjieva and Williams' contribution, in which some rural residents – that is, not policy-makers – saw the implementation of the communication infrastructure as a chance to draw, in their eyes, "quality people" to the rural villages of Alberta.

The mediations of the city and the country thus constitute a dualistic imaginary structure in which one side cannot be conceived of without the other. This imaginary structure, which is indeed a lived space, also saturates popular media representations to a great extent, promoting *either* the volatile urban cultural mélange *or* the sedimented rural idyll as the principal landscapes of desire (DuPuis 2006). Still, these seemingly opposed representational ensembles constitute one coherent set of modern consumption, excluding modes of consumption that do not "fit" while including non-desired forms of rurality and urbanity. Consequently, as the following articles scrutinize the multi-layered constitution of this interplay, a critical reader must also reflect upon where the real "other spaces" might be located. What is annihilated by the urban-rural divide?

Magnus Andersson is postdoctoral researcher at School of Arts and Communication, Malmö University. He has two ongoing research projects within the scope of Communication Geography: one on rural media spaces and one on media and migration. E-mail: magnus.andersson@mah.se

André Jansson is a professor in Media and Communication Studies at Karlstad University, Sweden. He currently leads two research projects: "Rural Networking/Networking the Rural" together with Magnus Andersson (funded by FORMAS), and "Secure Spaces: Media, Consumption and Social Surveillance" together with Miuyase Christensen (funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond).
E-mail: andre.jansson@kau.se

Notes

1   This special section of Culture Unbound has been produced within the ongoing project Rural Networking/Networking the Rural, financed by The Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning.

References

Adams, Paul C. (2009): *Geographies of Media and Communication A Critical Introduction*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Bakardjieva, Maria (2008): ”Making Sense of Broadband in Rural Alberta, Canada”, *Observatio*, 2:1, 33-53.

Bell, David (2006): ”Variations on the Rural Idyll”, Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden & Patrick H. Mooney (eds): *Handbook of Rural Studies*, London: Sage.

Berger, Peter L., Birgitte Berger & Hansfried Kellner (1973): *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*, New York: Random House.

Blum, Alan (2003): *The Imaginative Structure of the City*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Castells, Manuel (1996): *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Cloke, Paul (1997): ”Country Backwater to Virtual Village? Rural Studies and 'The Cultural Turn'”, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 13:1, 367-375.

Couldry, Nick (2003): *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, London: Routledge.

Couldry, Nick & Anna McCarthy (eds) (2004): *Mediaspace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age*, London: Routledge.

Cresswell, Tim (2006): *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*, London: Routledge.

Cruickshank, Jörn (2009): ”A Play for Rurality – Modernization versus Local Autonomy”, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 25, 98-107.

DuPuis, E. Melanie (2006): ”Landscapes of Desires?”, Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden & Patrick H. Mooney (eds): *Handbook of Rural Studies*, London: Sage.

Falkheimer, Jesper & André Jansson (eds) (2006): *Geographies of Communication: The Spatial Turn in Media Studies*, Göteborg: Nordicom.

Fish, Robert (2005): ”Mobile Viewers: Media Producers and the Televisual Tourist”, David Crouch, Rhona Jackson & Felix Thompson (eds): *The Media and the Tourist Imagination: Converging Cultures*, London: Routledge.

Florida, Richard (2005): *Cities and the Creative Class*, London: Routledge.

Fornäs, Johan (2000): “The Crucial In Between: The Centrality of Mediation in Cultural Studies”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3:1, 45-65.

Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2006): *A Postcapitalist Politics,* London: University of Minnesota Press.

Graham, Stephen (ed) (2004): *The Cybercities Reader*, London: Routledge.

Green, Lelia (1998): *Communications and the Constructions of Community: Consuming the Remote Commercial Television Service in Western Australia*, Unpublished PhD thesis, Murdoch University, Australia.

Halfacree, Keith (1993): ”Locality and Social Representation: Space, Discourse and Alternative Definitions of the Rural”, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 9:1, 23-37.

Hansen, Gro Sandkjaer (2008): ”E-communication: Strengthening the Ties between Councillors and Citizens in Norwegian Local Government?”, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 31:3, 333-361.

Hartley, John (2005): *Creative Industries*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Harvey, David (1990): *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Higmore, Ben (2005): *Cityscapes: Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jansson, André (2005): ”Re-Encoding the Spectacle: Urban Fatefulness and Mediated Stigmatization in 'The City of Tomorrow'”*, Urban Studies*, 41:10, 1671-91.

—— (2007): "Texture: A Key Concept for Communication Geography", *European Journal of Cultural Studies,* 10:2, 185-202.

Lash, Scott & John Urry (1994): *Economies of Signs and Space*, London: Sage.

Lefebvre, Henri (1974/1991): *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Lynch, Kevin (1960): *The Image of the City*, Cambridge, Ma: The MIT Press.

Massey, Doreen (2007): *World City*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Morley, David (2000): *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*, London: Routledge.

—— (2006): *Media, Modernity, Technology: Geographies of the New*, London: Routledge.

Murdoch, Jonathan (2006): "Networking Rurality: Emergent Complexity in the Countryside", Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden & Patrick H. Mooney (eds): *Handbook of Rural Studies*, London: Sage.

Phillips, Martin (2004): "Other Geographies of Gentrification", *Progress in Human Geography*, 28:1, 5-30.

Sassen, Saskia (2001): *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, 2nd Edition, Princeton: Princeton UP.

Urry, John (2001): *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*, London: Routledge.

Woods, Michael (2005): *Rural Geography*, London: Sage.

—— (2007): "Engaging the Global Countryside: Globalization, Hybridity and the Reconstitution of Rural Place", *Progress in Human Geography*, 31:4, 485-507.

Zukin, Sharon (1995): *The Cultures of Cities*, Oxford: Blackwell.