Introduction to Special Issue: Placemaking Beyond Cities. Geomedia perspectives on every-day life in small towns and rural communities

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Abstract

This special issue of *Culture Unbound* directs attention *beyond cities*, to small towns and rural communities, and the practices taking place there. Referring to a previous special issue on 'Rural Media Spaces' from 2010, this special issue revisits the notion of 'the rural' versus 'the urban' through the concept of placemaking and geomedia. In a mediatized society, placemaking practices cannot be understood without simultaneously understanding different media practices and how they affect place. A geomedia perspective on placemaking beyond cities, therefore, brings new perspectives on media representations of small towns and rural communities, related to the materialization of space and how we engage with and perceive the world. Geomedia also includes a focus on layers of digitalization and new media in the relations between place and practice.

The issue brings together researchers from a wide range of subjects, and the articles in this volume address empirical examples from different rural places and small towns in Sweden and internationally. Taken together, a manifold of issues relating to media and placemaking beyond cities are covered, for example, inclusion/exclusion, representation, resistance, community building, belonging, and identification.

Keywords: Placemaking, geomedia, rural/urban, transition, sustainability

Introduction

This special issue of Culture Unbound directs attention beyond cities, to small towns and rural communities, and the practices taking place there. More specifically, we are interested in placemaking practices in what can be described as the flip side of the urban norm. The latter is often contrasted with the rural, as seen in the rural-urban continuum widely existing in both research and popular culture. However, the urban norm also affects small towns and municipalities, which is a phenomenon seldom acknowledged in current research. In the well-established fields of Urban Studies and Rural Studies, the cases of in-between small and medium-sized towns and communities are left almost unattended (e.g., Andersson & Jansson 2010). A previous special issue of Culture Unbound, "Rural Media Spaces: Communication Geography on New Terrain" (2010), draws attention to how the urban is overrepresented in social and cultural theory, and how information and communication technology are prominent features in the discourse of the global, mega city. Instead, that special issue deals with questions of what happens to rural spaces and societies, and the places beyond cities, in the processes of globalization and mediatization. They also turn the question the other way around and ask how the rural, in turn, affects the same processes.

The previous themed issue pointed out a research gap in the field of "rural media spaces" and approached the gap with articles discussing "the relationship between mediation, mediatization, and rurality in the global era" (Andersson & Jansson 2010:122). The rural has gained increased attention as a media space since 2010. This is done, for example, through studies of different dimensions of digitalisation of the rural (e.g. Ali, 2021; Birnbaum et al. 2021), tourism and mediatization in rural areas (e.g. Jansson & Magnusson 2012; Jansson 2013; Sterly 2017; Türkoğlu 2020), media representations of rural spaces (e.g. Fisker et al. 2022; Lundgren & Johansson 2017; Murti 2020; Wright & Eaton 2018), and decreased journalistic and media coverage (e.g. Gulyas et al. 2019; McCollough et al. 2017; Napoli et al. 2017; Örnebring & Hellekant Rowe 2022).

As discourses of climate change have proliferated, the rural has also grown in importance as an imagined space of refuge, not least for groups such as the transition movement that is often located in the countryside and small towns (Vlasov & Ekberg 2021). In addition to that, recent events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have interrupted the global food supply chains and as a result increased interest in the possibility of self-sufficiency in the countryside where it is easier to grow one's own food and to have access to natural resources. The ideal of self-sufficiency and a desire for access to rural land are shared also among so-called preppers (Ford 2021), at the same time as rural communities and small towns are often used as a depository for immigrants in the

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early stages of refugee accommodation, with a hope that they will stay and reverse depopulation trends (Arora-Jonsson 2017).

The increased interest in the rural as a media space can be understood in relation to the so-called spatial turn in Media Studies and the media turn in Human Geography (e.g., Adams & Jansson 2012; Falkheimer & Jansson 2006; Fast et al. 2018; Thielmann 2007). These mutual reorientations have led to 'a bridge between disciplines' (Adams & Jansson, 2012) and the new subfield of research; geomedia (Fast et al. 2018; McQuire 2016; Thielman 2010). This turn has also meant an increased interest in questions of placemaking with and through media. Now, more than a decade after the special issue on "Rural Media Spaces", this special issue revisits the notion of 'the rural' versus 'the urban', through the concepts of placemaking and geomedia, which will highlight the interconnection between place and media (Fast et al. 2018). This special issue views the current status of placemaking in rural and small places through the following perspectives:

> How is placemaking articulated in rural/small town everyday life?

> How is rural placemaking articulated in relation to urban norms?

> How can a geomedia perspective be applied to placemaking beyond cities?

The issue brings together researchers from a wide range of subjects, e.g., Human Geography, Tourism Studies, Media and Communication Studies, Ethnology, and Rhetoric, and the articles in this volume address empirical examples from different rural places and small towns in Sweden and internationally. Taken together, a manifold of issues relating to media and placemaking beyond cities are covered, for example, inclusion/exclusion, representation, resistance, community building, belonging and identification, through empirically informed studies of placemaking practices in various contexts.

The media production of meaning concerning rural resilience in local and national Swedish news press articles is treated by Lundgren and Ljuslinder (2024) in "'Country residents take the fight': Representing rural resilience". Community-building efforts of a privileged alternative community in a small town are presented in Ljungberg's (2024) article "#Nowhereland: Placemaking and privilege in an alternative 'cocoon community'". Ironside and Reid (2024) focus on digital placemaking in the rural hinterland in the North East of Scotland in their article "Reimagining the Rural Hinterland: an investigation of participatory digital placemaking in rural communities". Further, in the article "It never rains in

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Great Yarmouth (according to Google Images): Visual representations of a coastal town", Brantner and Amat-Rodrigues (2024) analyse the visual representation of the British coastal town Great Yarmouth on Google Images. Finally, in "There's a hinterland in me.' Ambivalent place-making in popular music from a national periphery" Bruhn (2024) discusses the expression of placemaking and rural resistance in popular music lyrics by artists living in Swedish Lapland.

We will start this introduction with a discussion that clarifies how this issue deals with the concepts of place, placemaking, and geomedia. After that, we dig deeper into research on the urban-rural divide, related to sustainability discourses.

Placemaking and geomedia

We are constantly interacting with places. What we do takes place somewhere and is meaningful in relation to that place. At the same time, we influence the place of which we are a part; in fact, we contribute to the making of the place. According to this view, a place is produced, 'made', by the people inhabiting or otherwise dwelling in it. With this perspective of place, we depart from a conception of place as a relationally constructed rather than a fixed entity. Lefebvre (1991) illustrates this by a triad of spatial practice (members of society, the outside world, and daily routines), representations of space (experts, planners, knowledge, power, and construction), and representational space (inhabitants and their experiences, images, culture). Place is in this way shaped by the conception, perceptions, and practices of both users and others, as well as by representations of that place (Cresswell 2014; Lefebvre 1991). By understanding space as a negotiation between these parameters, we can disentangle why a place appears and is understood in a specific way. This relates to Massey's (1994) relational conceptualisation of place, in which places are constantly changing assemblages of interwoven, trans-local forces. When adding Massey's (1994) relational conceptualisation of place and a relational time–space perspective (Massey 2005), this also means that an individual creates their own experience of place in its own time–spatial context.

Based on Lefebvre's (1991) and Massey's (1994; 2005) construction of social space, a place is formed in the negotiation between actors within the place and performances of the place created by others. By understanding space as a negotiation between actors and place, we can disentangle why a place appears and is understood in a specific way. Regarding placemaking, for example, in the context of tourism and our everyday life, the constitution of a place is based on a variety of negotiations, which also include media technology and media representations. The ongoing convergence of digital and physical environments again raises questions about place (cf. Halegoua & Polson 2021; Kitchin &

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Dodge 2011; Wilken & Goggin 2012) and the role digital media practices play in placemaking.

The ongoing negotiation and renegotiation of a place is constant placemaking. Going through the literature, there are different spellings of the concept: place-making, placemaking, and place making. Lew (2017) suggests a semantically based distinction between place-making as bottom-up, with organic and unplanned actions/agency of individuals or small groups, and placemaking as top-down, with planned and intentional actions of governments and/or local authorities. Through a review of spatial planning literature, Strydom et al. (2018) show, however, that there has been a re-orientation of the placemaking concept from a top-down change of the physical/spatial environment towards placemaking as an enabling and empowering tool for community learning and sharing practices. Lew (2017) argues for the all-inclusive concept of placemaking. As most places have a mix of local and global elements, the two concepts should, according to Lew (2017), be regarded as endpoints of a continuum of options, from tangible to intangible. Although both share the same tools, the intentions and outcomes can vary enormously. Based on Strydom et al.'s (2018) research that shows that bottom-up practices are already included in the placemaking concept, we as guest editors have decided not to streamline the use of the concepts in the special issue. We have left it to the individual authors to define how to use and relate to placemaking, why the concept is used differently in the contributing articles.

An important contribution of this special issue to the placemaking concept and theoretical use is, however, the influence of media in placemaking practice. The special issue shows that in a mediatised society, placemaking practices cannot be understood without simultaneously understanding different media practices and how they affect place. Communication always 'takes place' and/or is shaped by place and is understood somewhere. At the same time, media technologies are part of the construction of space and therefore part of shaping the place (Adams & Jansson 2012; Adams 2018). A geomedia perspective combines these two perspectives and brings new insights into the materialisation of space and how we engage with and perceive the world (Fast et al. 2018), and is therefore given a central part in this special issue. Geomedia also includes a focus on layers of digitalisation and new media in the relations between place and practice. These provide, as highlighted by Fast et al. (2018), interdisciplinary research questions at the intersection of media studies and geography, where ontologies and epistemologies of space/time and mediation/mediatization come together. In this special issue, Ironside and Reed (2024) are, for example, handling a bottom–up approach to placemaking in relation to digital heritage and digital placemaking while Brantner & Rodríguez-Amat (2024) are studying the

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opposite with Google images' representation of placemaking as commodification. Lundgren and Ljuslinder (2024) also have a focus on how media representations constitute ruralities and rural identities and produce resilience as both an ideal and necessity. Bruhn (2024), on the other hand, deals with the rhetoric of placemaking in popular music, i.e., how identities, moods, and sentiments are represented, rhetorically constructed, and attached to place. Ljungberg (2024), in turn, discusses placemaking and the (social media) representation of a place by studying the practices of a relatively privileged group.

Brantner and Rodríguez-Amat (2024) as well as Ljungberg (2024) address the invisibility of people and culture in the representations studied. In both cases, this erasure is the expression of a tourist gaze that privileges the interests and experiences of visitors over that of more permanent inhabitants. Bruhn (2024) brings attention to how artists living in a region of decline express their everyday life through contemporary music, thus producing a counter image of the region as a cultural movement of resistance. Reid and Ironside (2024) provide a more positive perspective on digital representations as facilitating the creation of heritage from below. In Lundgren and Ljuslinder's (2024) analysis of news press articles, people, on the other hand, are in focus as actors for local resilience. They, however, conclude with a call to question the unproblematized representation of people as actors for resilience, that seldom includes place-based circumstances and the influence from, for example, media.

Urban/rural

A geomedia perspective is used in this special issue to explore issues of representation and power related to placemaking. For example, this perspective involves identifying and analysing expressions of the urban norm (Adams & Jansson, 2012). The perspective of the non-urban as deviant has parallels in cultural history, as city life has long been associated with modernity and positive connotations, such as possibilities, social mobility, the future, and wealth (e.g., Dibazar et al., 2013; Featherstone, 2007). These narratives have also been supported in political discourse, linking modernity to progress and negatively contrasting it with the past. Stenbacka and Heldt Cassel (2020) have highlighted the relationship between urban and rural communities and discuss how words such as "split" and "shattering" have been evident in the recent debate. Urban spaces have been portrayed as responsible for economic and cultural growth, while in contrast, rural places have been depicted as grappling with problems of decreasing population and opportunities, or have been neglected (Stenbacka & Heldt Cassel, 2020). This presents a dichotomy of two different spaces, each with its unique opportunities, both equally important for research. Rural spaces, as

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argued by Stenbacka and Heldt Cassel, are viewed mainly as recreational spaces for an urban population, encompassing a wide range of living conditions (Westholm, 2022), which need to be considered.

Representations of the rural often connect stereotypes regarding gender and homogenous ethnicity with perceptions of tradition and what is often seen as outdated (see, e.g., Arora-Jonsson, 2017, for an overview and discussion). One example is how the rural is associated with images of normative heterosexuality and the nuclear family as the ideal family form, linked to ideas of naturalness and moral purity (Pini et al., 2013). Norms regarding the urban and the rural in relation to gender issues are also evident in historical environments and within tourism, where a female perspective and rural women, in general, are seldom encountered (e.g., Domosh & Seager, 2001). At the same time, the countryside is often depicted as the embodiment of whiteness, a "historically unchanging territory in which racial difference can only be seen as an uncomfortable and destabilizing presence" (Morley, 2000: 146). These representations further disregard the presence of migrants and migrant labour in the countryside, a central aspect of what researchers call the "global countryside," shaped by neoliberal globalization (van Eerbeek, 2021). Or, as Brantner and Rodríguez-Amat (2024) argue in their article, biased place representation is shaped by Google Images' algorithms to commodify placemaking in line with an urban or rural norm, leaving semi-peripheral towns caught in between. Ljungberg (2024) argues that the urban norm can even be reproduced in social media representations produced by groups seeking to escape urban life. Digital media has, however, become an important arena for expressing and performing resistance to dominant representations of the rural as traditional, failing, and faulty. Forums have been established where participants create a sense of community, shape counter-narratives, and express their frustration about the urban norm (Lundgren & Johansson, 2017).

Excluding the rural and small towns means excluding important perspectives not only on different spaces but also on the living conditions of everyday life. The predominant focus on the city or urban life does not imply that the rural does not exist or is not relevant in research. Rather, the differences or tensions between them provide a contrast to the norm and offer new perspectives and knowledge. Examples like the one in Ironside and Reid's (2024) article in this special issue are essential. In their article, digital placemaking is explored and discussed in relation to how digital technology has provided a platform to challenge urban norms and offer new ways of representing the physical and cultural landscape of urban and rural spaces. In the well-established fields of Urban Studies and Rural Studies, cases of in-between spaces, such as small and medium-sized towns and communities, are often overlooked. This issue contributes perspectives on these types of places. The articles address the relationship (or tension) between the

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urban and the rural in various ways. Several of the contributing articles revolve around the urban as a norm and how the construction of a sense of place or digital placemaking challenges this norm. Ironside and Reid (2024) highlight the challenge of the urban norm through digital technology and how new representations of rural spaces are created in rural hinterlands. In the article by Brantner and Rodríguez-Amat (2024), the tension between the urban and the rural is discussed, along with arguments about small and medium-sized towns caught 'in between,' taking an ambivalent position. They problematise the small and medium-sized town in relation to visual representation, where place identities are reduced to stereotypes. Bruhn (2024) focuses on how music creates communities in rural and even urban peripheries and how peripherality is constructed as a global phenomenon that enforces locality. Ljungberg (2024) examines how a local place in a small town gains meaning within a community defined by privileged mobility, often implicitly reinforcing the urban norm. Lundgren and Ljuslinder (2024) show how rural identities are represented as 'different,' attaching rural areas and identities to stereotypical rural imagery.

Furthermore, this special issue contributes to the contemporary debate on hybrid solutions for work and everyday life, which could create new possibilities for rural areas and small towns to increase their attractiveness (e.g., Bosworth et al., 2023). Access to work is a crucial factor for moving to smaller towns and rural areas, even though research shows that non-economic factors like social life, the environment, and housing are more determinative than economic factors when evaluating migrants' satisfaction with migration outcomes (Lundholm & Malmberg, 2006). The development of the Internet in the 1990s was expected to eliminate geographical distance and make it possible to work from anywhere. However, as Sassen (2006) and others have shown, large cities continue to play a central role as hubs in the global economy. This connection between ICTs and large cities is evident in marketing that links mobile media technologies firmly to urban imaginaries (Fast, 2018). The opportunities to take advantage of digitalized work also vary widely depending on one's profession, employer, and geography (Sandow & Lundholm, 2020). For instance, a study on the working lives of journalists by Örnebring and Möller (2018) revealed that, in a precarious job market, journalists' desire to live outside large cities often meant leaving journalism. The increased digital development alongside the Covid-19 pandemic has, however, opened up new ways of living and working with hybrid solutions (Arntz et al., 2020; Arnfalk et al., 2021). This has created new conditions and opportunities for rural places to attract residents, businesses, and services, possibly accelerating trends of counter-urbanization or counter-movement, often described in research as 'down-shifting,' related to a discourse on sustainability and transition (e.g., Hoppstadius & Åkerlund, 2022; Sandow & Lundholm, 2020).

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Such desires for 'down-shifting' are, at the same time, part of counterurbanization movements that have existed since the beginning of modernity (Vlasov & Ekberg, 2021). The last decade has seen the growth of the so-called transition movement, concerned with the concept of Peak Oil and the threat of climate change (Neal, 2013; Mälgand, 2014). The transition movement is firmly rooted in place and is often located in the countryside and small towns (Neal, 2013; Kenis & Mathijs, 2014). Within the transition movement and other similar groups, the countryside is given meaning as a place that enables personal transformation as well as transformations of society and communities (Vlasov & Ekberg, 2021; Mälgand, 2014). Nevertheless, the urban norm still tends to dominate this discourse, and urban solutions are assumed to be applicable in rural areas. The urban norm is perpetuated when a desire for life outside of cities is expressed through colonial imaginaries of an empty countryside that can be conquered (Vlasov & Ekberg, 2021).

The increased interest in environmental and social sustainability, as expressed in the transition movement and the construction of eco villages, among other practices, raises new questions about placemaking beyond cities in relation to these practices. Some of the articles in this special issue discuss the concept of sustainability. Lundgren and Ljuslinder's (2024) article focuses on issues of social sustainability in small towns in terms of resilience as a celebrated ideal and a condition of possibility for rural areas. Ljungberg (2024) discusses environmental sustainability and emotional connections to nature as part of placemaking. Ironside and Reid (2024) touch on social sustainability by investigating a sustainable participatory approach to working with digital placemaking. The articles in this special issue therefore contribute to both understandings of how places beyond cities are represented and transitional movements.

Conclusion

This special issue has revisited the notion of 'the rural' versus 'the urban' through the concept of placemaking and geomedia, highlighting the interconnection between place and media. The articles point to the continuing strength of the urban norm but also how it is challenged. Media representations, such as digital placemaking or pop cultural expressions, can provide a platform for more voices beyond mainstream representations, but they can also result in making people and places less visible. Together, the articles in this issue illustrate the contradictory ways in which rural areas and small towns are represented, as both desired oases of authenticity, recreation, adventure, and resilience, and as left behind, stagnant, or even completely erased. The contributions discuss a variety of actors with differing interests and viewpoints, including tourists, residents, lifestyle migrants,

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and multinational tech companies. This special issue, therefore, contributes to existing research and theory on placemaking through, with, and by mediated expressions.

Despite this, the articles and this special issue highlight the need for a continuing important field of research, especially in relation to changes in society, which have brought smaller towns and rural areas into focus. Therefore, we call for further research on the relationship between the rural and placemaking. There is a growing need for increased knowledge and attention to issues such as sustainability, where rural areas and small towns stand in contrast to the urban norm, and power relations connected to placemaking. Furthermore, there is a need for research that offers new possibilities for representing the rural and amplifying the voices of people living, working, and visiting rural areas.

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