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Rural media studies: Making the case for a new subfield

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Abstract

It is time for a rural turn in media studies. Media studies are deeply imbricated in urban life. It is where most universities are located. It is where many media scholars live and work. Media workers, too, predominately exist in the urban – at least for now. Embedded in these urban settings, media studies have too often focused on urban perspectives and considered rural dimensions largely from a 'divides' perspective, wherein the rural has somehow less than the urban; or media studies have treated the rural as seemingly utopic areas evoking the idyllic and romantic where city dwellers travel or the wild is preserved. But the rural is more than that. Key works on media in the rural do exist but the field lacks articulation. This article is a step towards addressing this weakness. Drawing on examples from three rural areas, those of Europe, Central Asia and Oceania, this article shows how rural media studies have the capacity to question 'common sense' assumption in media research and to demonstrate the complexities of contemporary mediascapes. The problems we see include issues of mediated representation and perception, issues of communication and the myriad of societal challenges that come, in particular, with digital transformations.

Keywords

Central Asia, digital transformations, Europe, media studies, Oceania, rural

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Manifesting rural media studies

Rural media studies do not exist as a distinct sub-field in the discipline, but they should. It is easy to forgive media and rural scholars for the blind spot, especially in the digital age. In the history of rural-urban relations, digital transformations might only be the most recent chapter in a long and often tumultuous history of interaction. Still, it is hard to imagine one more seismic on a global level. Digital technologies and the internet, in particular, have collapsed space and time, the two main factors that distinguish human experiences of rural-urban relations. Wilken's (2011) monograph, for instance, suggests a reordering of the intersection between place and community in response to what he calls 'teletechnologies' or technologies of distance; and more classically, Castells (2000) interrogates a decline in place and a shift towards 'flows'. No longer highly isolated in their production and consumption of media, the two poles of this spectrum can melt into one another through instantaneous communication. In other words, rural studies seem to have had increasingly fewer reasons to prioritize media research. As Ali (2018) pointed out in one of the few other efforts that push for rural media studies, 'we are hard pressed to find serious and sustained critical scholarship on the rural as a condition of social existence . . . as medium of – and for – communication' (p. 4) despite occasional recognitions of the continued significance of place even in a globally technologically more interconnected world (e.g. Moores, 2012).

In this context, it appears as though media studies had even fewer reasons to engage with the rural. As Ali (2018) discusses in more detail, 'global communication studies has spent little time and space thinking, writing, and researching the sub-national' (p. 8) even when discussing links between geography and communication (e.g. Adams and Jansson, 2012). With mass urbanization leading to equally mass rural depopulation and incredible advancements in mining and agricultural technologies that substantially reduced the total number of humans needed for operation, it seemed like the rural was truly on its way to conceptual relegation. 'Urbanormativity' (Fulkerson and Thomas, 2019), a prioritization of the urban as the 'normal' and 'desirable' has, as the notion suggests, become the norm even more.

But was the rural deserving of such abandonment? Critical rural studies have pushed against this tendency (e.g. de Koning et al., 2021; Herzog, 2023; Thomas et al., 2012). In praxis, the COVID-19 pandemic showed us differently. Humanity was asked, often forced, to stay indoors. Not only indoors but in our own homes. Suddenly faced with immobility, the urban started to lose its lustre. Cramped apartments, once liveable owing to the vast array of other options like cafes, bars and movie theatres, quickly became impractical as parents had to work from home while teaching their children simultaneously. And so, unsurprisingly, people in many places started to return to the rural (Gonzalez-Leonardo et al., 2022), at least for the moment, but that moment matters. While the numbers may return to the urban, if anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has made clear that the rural is always ready to come back. In other words, the rural needs serious critical engagement supported by a more dedicated, systematic engagement with rural media as media that are fundamentally entangled with rural places as 'meaningful [sites]' (de Koning et al., 2021: 272) that are 'dynamic and dialectic' (Ali, 2018: 10) and thus potentially filled with unique and significant insights for media and rural scholars alike.

A growing, yet still comparatively small number of media scholars that engage with the rural have started to recognize its analytical significance. Patrick Brodie, for example, is organizing a panel on 'media rurality in global contexts' at the 2023 conference for the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, and co-organized a related 2-day workshop on the topic in 2022. Back in 2018, Christopher Ali published the aforementioned dedicated call for 'a critical theory of rural communication' and, even earlier, Barney (2011) argued against 'the systematic forgetting of the rural that characterizes most contemporary discussions of technology and politics' (p. 7). Beyond this interconnected circle of critical rural media scholars, few have heeded this call for a more dedicated rural approach to media studies. Our contribution to crosscurrents aims to further this push by elaborating on what a systematic engagement with diverse rural media in diverse global contexts could look like.

Engaging rural media

It would be easy to reverse engineer the concept of rural media studies, construct a false history or make claims of conceptual prefiguration. Indeed, threads have been laid down since the beginning of the field into the present. From McLuhan's (1994) global village first coined in 1964 to Patrick Ferrucci and Scott Eldridge II's *Barbarians Inside the Gate* of Journalism in 2022 (Ferrucci and Eldridge, 2022), media scholars have peppered their ideas with the rural, the wild (Haythornthwaite et al., 2018), and other urban/rural civilizational discourses, often favouring the former over the latter. It is time to go beyond representational analogies of rural otherness and start developing (social) media theories from the perspective of the rural and its diverse residents as their own actors in the parliament of ideas and practices that constitute the multidisciplinary endeavour of media studies today.

We could cut the pie of rural media studies in several different ways. Conceptualized in a challenge to 'urbanormativity,' the majority of the terrestrial planet falls under the category of rural. With no urban space, that is all Antarctica is. And, there are significant media-related phenomena to study even there or other variously populated rural spaces, from telecommunications and social isolation to the datafication of nature or 'wild' environments. Pringle (2020), for example, showed how, in rural Quebec and Eastern Canada, the snowmobile is not 'merely' a means of transportation but also of media circulation. Besides, while much has been said about smart cities (cf Lorinc, 2022), what about smart ice shelves? Smart rainforests? In praxis, smart rural initiatives are manifold. Linköping University's Electrical Engineering Department, for example, runs an app-based anti-poaching initiative titled 'Smart Savannah.' The app provides long-range radar and communication networks to increase security levels in nature reserves. Media studies have largely remained silent about such initiatives, even though the discipline is uniquely equipped to provide an in-depth understanding of the media dimensions of these potentially large-scale transformations of what and how we know and engage with rural, remote and/or wild environments.

Rural, remote and wild environments are too often overlooked by urban biases or shoehorned into particular frames. For example, the rural is regularly conceptualized as, primarily, a space for agricultural production (cf Pomeroy, 2019). The wild, in

comparison, is considered as a space for nature conservation (cf Navarro and Pereira, 2015). Besides, while we lump the three categories – rural, remote and wild – together, the three are not necessarily the same, but also not necessarily easy to disentangle.[1] For now, we prioritize the rural as the most immediate 'other' of the urban but recognize a potential future need to theorize the distinction between rural, remote and wild and what it may mean for rural media studies.

Instead of a 'rural-remote-wild' approach, we could also slice the rural media studies pie topically (cf Ali, 2018). Critical issues of the day coalesce in rural spaces. Indeed, it would seem the rural has a significant role to play in untangling or managing every single one of the Sustainable Development Goals formulated by the United Nations in response to key global challenges, even though, in comparison to the urban, the SDGs do not explicitly acknowledge the rural as a living place (de Koning et al., 2021). Opportunities abound. Media technologies and outlets are central to promoting public programmes that aim to realize the goals of SDG15 to 'protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems' (cf Bridgewater et al., 2015). Similarly, SDG4, which aspires to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all', is unthinkable without the contributions of long-distance radio and digital programmes that provide access to remote learners worldwide (cf Perraton, 2006).

A third option for slicing the rural media studies pie is to narrow in on particular regions, recognizing rural media's complex and contextually unique dimensions in specific places and spaces. Every place is, in one way or another, entangled with concerns expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals or located at contested border zones between rural, remote and wild environments. Yet, the specific, even though often also interconnected, political, economic, social and cultural histories of particular regions are immediately visible as potential starting points for a more holistic understanding of what constitutes rural media and what would rural media studies as a new sub-discipline realize.

Here we focus on three regions to move beyond singular case studies that have been central to previous calls for rural media, from Mathews and Ali's (2022) discussion of digital inclusion and broadband access in a rural county in the US to Barney's (2011) conceptualization of technologies of grain-handling as 'unconventional media' in rural Canada. Our three regions are Central Asia, Europe and Oceania. It is fair to say that Oceania and Central Asia are on the margins of mainstream media studies. As such they promise particularly unique insights into possibilities for rural media as 'unconventional' or 'unexpected'. Central Asia also presents a unique case. Urbanity here has an ancient pedigree and yet is dominated, as is often the case, by rural forces. Oceania is even more different. Widespread urbanity does not really exist. In fact, for most societies, urbanity is a relatively recent phenomenon. On the other hand, at least Western Europe is, similar to North American contexts, very much at the heart of the media studies at large, but not the Europe that interests us: rural Europe. Here the marginality is as acute as in any other rural area, or perhaps even more so due to the overwhelming dominance of 'urbanormative' media studies research elsewhere in the region (cf Jansson and Andersson, 2012). In the following section, each of us authors will briefly discuss these three individual cases and, in so doing, point to some of the potentials for disciplinary and interdisciplinary comprehensive innovation.

Central Asia

While some may perceive Central Asia as 'the middle of nowhere' (MacFadyen, 2009), historically, the region has been referred to as 'the heartland', connecting ancient trade routes and offering strategic depth to battling empires (Megoran and Sharapova, 2013). The countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, constituting the region of Central Asia,[2] share centuries of history but maintain substantial political, economic, geographical and social differences. It is a region of contrasts. Though there are significant urban sites, for instance, one of the oldest cities on the planet – Samarkand – with nearly 3000 years of urban history, rural life forms a significant yet neglected sphere. Financial, cultural, scholarly and other incentives and events are predominantly urban in focus. Centralisation of resources in the capital cities creates a disconnect between 'the centre' and 'the periphery', while the rural population is 42.18% in Kazakhstan, 63% in Kyrgyzstan, 72% in Tajikistan, 47% in Turkmenistan, and 49.75% in Uzbekistan (World Bank, n.d.).

The dynamic between the rural and the urban is further complicated in Central Asia through labour migration abroad to major cities across Russia. While labour migrants also penetrate markets in Turkey, South Korea and China, most work in Russia, making the region economically and politically dependent on Moscow (CABAR.Asia, 2021). Russia also plays a significant role in Central Asia's domestic media sector, as its broadcast channels penetrate households across urban and rural dwellings, influencing people's perception of the world through the lens of Moscow. Take Kyrgyzstan, for instance. Here the state television broadcaster pays Russian state media channels for their programmes that are freely available to audiences across Kyrgyzstan as part of the 'social package' (Айдаров, 2022). In the rural areas of Central Asia, Russian media are often the only entertainment option, bringing along propaganda and political agenda of the Kremlin. There are high risks linked to Russia's media influence, such as disinformation, swayed portrayals of the West and glorification of Russia's achievements in Syria and Ukraine (Sultonnazarov, 2019). Domestic information producers' limited availability and capacity further stimulate reliance on Russia's media products. Journalists in Central Asia suffer financially, are under pressure from repressive regimes and practice self-censorship (Talant, 2022). Uncompetitive domestic media products and penetration of Russia's propaganda puts vulnerable people in conditions of media precarity. For instance, both before their journey and while in Russia, millions of Central Asian labour migrants are subjected to misleading information that has severe consequences for their well-being (Gabdulhakov, 2022).

Rural media studies in Central Asia are urgent, as the region remains an academic 'terra incognita'. Moreover, within its anti-colonial spirit, rural studies would empower locally-produced knowledge and modes of communicating this knowledge. Already there are some unique initiatives such as the 'Ilimbox' (science in the box) in Kyrgyzstan – a portable digital library containing books, videos and Wikipedia articles delivered by the Internet Society to students in rural areas, sometimes on donkeys (Yang, 2021). Another fascinating educational initiative focused on the rural is the University of Central Asia, whose mission is to deliver education to the remote mountain societies in the region (University of Central Asia, n.d.). Amid these initiatives and the penetration of

technology, the impact of digital transformations on social change and social harm remain grossly unexplored. Often, aid organizations treat technology as neutral and apolitical, while the various power positions and economic and political interests are ignored (Gabdulhakov and Zakharchenko, work in progress). What is the impact of digital transformations on gender, family affairs, spirituality, inter-ethnic relations and migration? How are the colonial past and present negotiated and addressed online? What is the role of digital technology in the domain of news and disinformation?

Digital technologies are central to the region's agenda (Asian Development Bank, 2022). Therefore, knowledge production that can facilitate this transformation with a focus on benefiting the local communities must also be prioritized.

Europe

Despite covering 83% of Europe and being home to around 30.6% of the population (European Commission, 2018), rural areas are among the poorest regions of Europe. These regions also suffer from demographic change, as young people move away to study and get better jobs. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the issues that rural communities have been dealing with, particularly the lack of digitalization has worsened, further promoting injustice and inequality.

Still, Europe's rural areas hold great potential for the future. They offer a home to many people in Europe and are crucial to Europe's biodiversity while also being an excellent place for leisure and recreation. Indeed, as revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic, rebalancing the current *imbalances* (demographic, economic, etc.) between rural and urban European areas is no longer an option but a necessity to strengthen societies' resilience and boost their sustainability.

We trace these imbalances back to the developments faced by European rural areas in recent decades. These areas have experienced socio-economic decline and restructuring, moving from densely populated areas dominated by economic activity based primarily on the primary sector to sparsely populated and multifunctional production and consumption spaces (Silva and Figueiredo, 2013). In these new spaces, agriculture and forestry intermingle with other services and economic activities, particularly those related to environmental and conservation issues and tourism (Halfacree, 2007).

These changes originate from various factors, including (a) agricultural mechanization, (b) the European Union's recent deployment of policies and initiatives aimed at achieving more sustainable agriculture (Mormont, 1994) and (c) the development of tourism for economic diversification and growth in rural areas (Silva, 2009). Additional factors comprise the urbanization of most European countries (about 70% of the population of the European Union lives in cities, according to Eurostat, 2018); increased mobility facilitating urban-rural relations (Urry, 2007); and global environmental anxieties (Ramos-Real, 1995).

These changes have, at times, provoked conflicts between those living and working in rural areas and those aiming to accelerate the sustainability of these spaces. In these clashes, the appropriation and use of new media have played an unprecedented role, as the protests regarding the nitrogen emissions in the Netherlands show.

The Netherlands is a nitrogen hot spot partly because it is a populous, urbanised nation, but mostly because it has the densest animal farm livestock in the world (Stokstad, 2019). This became apparent in 2019, when the country entered a nitrogen crisis after a report by the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) revealed that farmers were responsible for 46% of the country's nitrogen emissions (RIVM, 2019). As a result, the government adopted stricter rules for farmers, including providing funding to buy livestock from farmers who wanted to stop farming. In response to these measures, farmers from all over the Netherlands organized and participated in a number of protests over the past three years to push back against the government's strategy.

Online platforms have been key in the organization and coordination of these protests. Protesters have extensively used the Twitter hashtag #steundeboer ('supportthefarmer') and flooded YouTube with hundreds of videos encouraging mobilizations and reporting about the state of the clashes. All this has helped the farmers' movement to garner important support from the general public, as revealed by the results of the recent provincial elections in the country (March 15, 2023), which the new-born party 'BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB)' ('FarmerCitizenMovement') won.

While there is a vast amount of literature on the transformation of rural territories in recent decades in Europe and on the perceptions about rurality, little attention has been paid to new media's role in (re)constructing these spaces. Moreover, when it comes to the study of new media in rural Europe, the works on digital divide (e.g., Esteban-Navarro et al., 2020; Vicente and Lopez, 2011) seem to lead the research in the field. Yet, as mentioned above, transitioning from fossil-fuel-based societies to sustainable ones requires bringing these very same inhabitants of rural European areas on board (Ludovico et al., 2020). Dissecting the many facets of rural inhabitants' practices and uses of digital media is one way to accelerate this much-needed transition.

Oceania

Epeli Hau'ofa (1994), a Tongan and Fijian writer and anthropologist, described Oceania as a 'Sea of Islands'. He challenged simplistic and often derogatory portrayals of the diverse and manifold islands across the southern Pacific as small, poor and isolated. In as far as Pacific Islanders are disconnected from each other and 'from their far-flung sources of wealth and cultural enrichment' (p. 155), Hau'ofa argued, they are so because of 19th-century imperialism and the boundaries it created and enforced. Beyond these imperial legacies, the 'Sea of Islands' is characterized by complex, meaningful and long-standing connections. These connections are not predicated on the construction of urban centres but on unique navigational skills and outrigger canoes that facilitate strong social networks across the seas and rural environments.

The diverse media landscapes and histories of this 'Sea of Islands' reflect this interconnectedness. Oceania was one of the last regions to widely adopt digital technologies, mobile phones and the Internet (Hobbis, 2019), with digital divide and exclusion debates dominating the region's policy circles and development initiatives (cf Cave, 2012). Yet, Oceania has also been at the forefront of interactive, collaborative web-based initiatives. Exemplary is the now-defunct website oceanie.org which was first envisioned in 1993 and based on a unique, interactive digital architecture to create and display an

encyclopaedia of terms and concepts central across Oceanic lifeworlds (cf Maranda, 2013). Not much later, in 1996, Alan Howard initiated rotuma.net, a community website for Rotuma, an outlier island of Fiji. In 2022, Rotuma.net continued to connect Rotuma's vast global diaspora, among others, by '[providing] an opportunity for Rotumans to share their life experiences with members of the global Rotuman community' (https://rotuma.net/os/biographies/life_stories.htm) (cf Howard, 1999).

Digital divide narratives also fail to recognize the ingenuity of Pacific Islanders,' now digital, seafaring. Access to digital technologies and media may be curtailed by factors such as a lack of cable infrastructures or monetary means to purchase large data packages, but this lack of access has given rise to creative culturally-embedded Internet adaptations. For example, the 'Bush Internet' of Solomon Islands entails a flourishing offline circulation of multimedia files as a means for facilitating reciprocal exchange networks (Hobbis and Hobbis, 2022b), in some ways comparable to the use of snowmobiles for media exchanges in rural Canada (Pringle, 2020). Solomon Islands is also the birthplace of an increasingly pan-Pacific music-streaming service as an indigenous alternative to large metropolitan competitors such as Spotify, which, on the one hand, 'cannot work in the Pacific due to the region's small market size and lack of credit card facilities for payments' (Watson et al., 2020: 2) and, on the other hand, clashes with Pacific values by failing to facilitate immediate revenue sharing with artists (Watson et al., 2020).

All of this, and more, means that the region represents an opportunity for new perspectives on adopting and adapting new, digital media; while offering unique opportunities for identifying the continuities and changes in 'unconventional media' (Barney, 2011) such as links between sand, iconoclasm and family photography in people's decisions to delete digital multimedia files (Hobbis and Hobbis, 2021). Oceanic case studies essentially challenge media studies to interrogate the complexities of contemporary mediascapes. They question 'common sense' assumptions in media research, such as the dominance of capitalist tendencies in digital economies (Hobbis and Hobbis, 2022a). They also call for deeper scrutiny of key concepts in media studies, be it the digital gift economy or even cancel culture and its links with the notion of 'taboo' that spread from the Pacific to Euro-American lifeworlds alongside the voyages of Captain Cook.

Towards rural media studies

Whether ethnographer, archivist or statistical surveyor, the critical media scholar aims to study the rural from a kaleidoscopic methodological perspective. The critical media scholar must go there and see for themselves, wherever that rural 'there' may be. A central institutional blind spot in media studies is a fault line that runs the depth of academia: most universities are in urban or suburban spaces, not rural ones. Border zones exist, for example, in the Hanseatic insular urbanity of Groningen, surrounded by the rural of the North Netherlands. Another example is the University of Northern British Columbia with campuses spread throughout the rural north of Canada's west. However, highly rural universities, such as the University of Central Asia campuses, based in various mountain ranges, are *very* rare. An often explicitly urban embedding shapes perspectives of scholars, many of whom may come from rural spaces themselves but leave to the urban and pursue academics careers, frequently in part as a rejection of their past rural

lives or because they have no other choice if they want to pursue university degrees and academic positions in particular.

This urban embedding of academic knowledge production is a fertile area for prejudice. Indeed, beyond the efforts of dedicated rural scholars, themselves often marginalized in the academy, this is too often how the rural exists in academic thought: as empirically void thought experiments and strawmen. Rural voices are necessary, and rural media studies must highlight disciplinary epistemologies that advance, rather than erase, those voices. It is a methodological imperative for an ethical, critical academic endeavour like the one we offer here. We are speaking of the need to get off the desktop and out of the armchair to survey, interview as well as participate and observe in rural life and of the need to do so in a way that prioritizes and values rural perspectives, not just extracts them for further processing in the urban, academic cells. Only by so doing can we adequately respond to Ali's (2018) point that 'we don't know' what it means 'to be rural in the digital age' (p. 18), all while also recognizing the manifold possibilities for uncovering diverse, unconventional and inspiring entanglements between manifold ruralities and media.

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Notes

1. For example, see Nicholas (2003) for a discussion of the rural-remote distinction in contexts of uneven digitization; and Molnar (1998) for a discussion of possibilities for convergence with a limited distinction between the rural and remote.
2. Some definitions include Afghanistan and Mongolia.

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