

CARGC PAPER 7
2018

THOUGHTS ON A CRITICAL THEORY OF RURAL COMMUNICATION





It is a distinct pleasure to introduce CARGC Paper 7, "Thoughts on A Critical Theory of Rural Communication," by Christopher Ali, the inaugural external faculty Fellow at the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication (CARGC) at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, who earlier delivered it as a CARGC Fellow Colloquium.

In CARGC's current and fifth year (counting the years when it was PARGC), it has expanded to include distinguished external faculty visitors, CARGC Fellows and CARGC Senior Fellows, who typically are in residence for a period ranging from two weeks to four months. They give individual colloquia, participate in working groups, and mentor CARGC Undergraduate, Doctoral and Postdoctoral Fellows, to continue producing innovative scholarship addressing important issues in global communication.

CARGC Paper 7 is a bold, innovative, and rich attempt to theorize the rural critically and comparatively. Chris Ali has a longstanding interest in developing a deeper understanding of "the local" from theoretical, historical, geographical and policy angles. This culminated in the publication of his book *Media Localism* (2017) – a revised version of his 2013 Annenberg doctoral dissertation—published while he was a CARGC Fellow with us for a semester.

Though the local has figured prominently in global communication research, as ethnographic locus, space of resistance, place of lived experience, or simply as a multidimensional foil to the global, the rural has received scant, if any, attention for years.

Decades ago, the rural was indirectly but surely an important aspect of communication research in those US departments whose interest in communication was bound to agricultural concerns. Generally, as Ali put it, "in the genealogy of media studies, the rural is often implied, but seldom confronted." CARGC Paper 7 addresses that historical gap in the field.

In CARGC Paper 7, Chris underscores how important an analytical category the rural is: rather than a dismissed backwater of a normative urban, the rural emerges here as a vibrant space, a pregnant category, a pressing concern. The elements of a critical theory of the rural presented here underscore how complex such a space is, shaped by market forces, policy initiatives, technological development, demographic shifts, and community identities. Media regulation and media content are central to a rich understanding of the rural.

Nonetheless, as Chris importantly points out, a critical theory of rural communication must avoid romanticizing the rural—as many have done with the local—and eschew media centrism, a concern that, as many of you know, is important to CARGC's mission. Passionately argued and thoroughly theorized, "Thoughts on A Critical Theory of Rural Communication" promises to be a major contribution to global communication studies.

I hope you find CARGC Paper 7 insightful and provocative. Please follow us at @AnnenbergCARGC for updates on future events, publications and developments, and share this paper widely.



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Citation:

Ali, Christopher. Thoughts
on a Critical Theory of Rural
Communication. CARGC
Paper 7. Philadelphia,
USA: CARGC Press.

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"What is Montana without cowboys? Once you get rid of agriculture, you're left with nothingness. You're not using the land. It just becomes looking country"

(Ed Marston, Rocky Mountain News as cited in Kotkin 2000, 51)

Introduction: What Does It Mean To Be Rural?

In 2008 the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) published an article titled "Defining the 'rural' in rural America" (Cromartie and Bucholtz 2008). On the surface, we might express concern that the agency responsible for farming in America needed an article to figure out what rural meant. Delving deeper, however, the article offers a fascinating engagement with the question of the rural in modern life: "The term 'rural' conjures widely shared images of farms, ranches, villages, small towns, and open spaces. Yet when it comes to distinguishing rural from urban places, researchers and policy makers employ a dizzying array of definitions."

The rural is often taken to mean what it is not: urban (Ilbery 1998; Thomas et al. 2013). But deciding what is urban is an equally difficult problem. In practical terms, the US Census Bureau defines rural as any population cluster that is neither an urbanized area (50,000 or more people) or urban cluster (2,500 – 50,000 people) (US 2016). Urban areas are also defined as those that "have a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile" whereas urban clusters are "the surrounding census blocks that have an overall density of at least 500 people per square mile" (FCC 2011). USDA, when assessing loan requests, grants, and rural development typically uses a definition of rural that equates to a population cluster of less than 20,000 (United States GAO 2014).

Geography also has much to do with this definition of rural and urban: should a "rural area" be defined as a population center (census), a land-use center ("urban areas") or an economic center (micro/metro)? Using these definitions, the above article noted:

Depending on the boundary choice and the population threshold, the share of the U.S. population defined as rural and its socioeconomic characteristics vary substantially. In 2000, 21 percent of the U.S. population was designated rural using the Census Bureau's land-use definition (outside urban areas of 2,500 or more people), compared with 17 percent for economically based nonmetro areas (outside metro areas of 50,000 or more). (Cromartie and Bucholtz 2008).

This makes it difficult for lawmakers and regulators to enact policies targeted towards rural areas. In the field of telecommunications, for instance, should “rural broadband” be considered broadband for a population center of less than 20,000 or less than 5,000 – a threshold that will obviously include or exclude a considerable number of applicants. Moreover, how close to an urban center can a rural community be before it is considered a suburb? These questions have immediate and important political considerations.

A third strand moves us away from both geographic and socio-cultural (i.e. demographic) definitions towards a more post-modern understanding of rural subjectivity and culture (Halfacree 1993; Ilbery 1998b; Phillips 1998). We might think of these either as “rural-as-a-locality” – suggesting that “if rural localities are to be studied in their own right, they must be carefully defined according to those characteristics which make them rural” or “rural-as-a-social-representation” whereby rurality is defined by discourse (Ilbery 1998, 3; Halfacree 1993). In this tradition, many also suggest that the search for a singular definition “is neither desirable or feasible” (Halfacree 1995 quoted in Ilbery 1998, 3), all the while recognizing that it “remains an important category because behaviour and decision making are influenced by people’s perceptions of rural” (Ilbery 1998, 3). In this capacity, the rural may be what post-structuralists call a “floating signifier” or what Christina Dunbar-Hestor (2013) calls a “discursive boundary object” with loose definitional perimeters.

Nevertheless, these floating definitional boundaries – intentional or otherwise - make it difficult to theorize the rural – a task already woefully undercomplete, even without these complications (Ilbery 1998a; Thomas et al. 2012). Most often in theoretical conversations the rural is taken to be a porous term – whatever scholars and rural dwellers choose it to be (Halfacree 1993; Ilbery 1998b). If not, then critical theorists tend to dismiss the rural as uninteresting (e.g. Lefebvre’s later work (2016, 1995, 1991)), perceive it as something that needs fixing (such as the digital divide; see Berry 2006; Oldenburg 1999), or point out our propensity to fetishize the rural through nostalgia (Thomas et al. 2012; Williams 1975). For his part, Marx (1993 [1939]) paid little heed to the rural aside from seeing it as a feeding ground for the urban work force. Indeed, in the *Gundrisse* he wrote of the “idiocy of rural” and “the detrimental effects of both the rural oppression from which he saw Capitalism as a great savior and the urban (Capitalist) oppression from which socialism would save the masses” (Thomas, et al. 2012, 37). Engels (2009), in *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, was slightly more forgiving. For his part, Henri Lefebvre (2016, 2003, 1995, 1991), after cutting his sociological teeth on treatises about the rural (see Lefebvre 1973) (including his doctoral dissertation) abandoned it in favor of more urban pastures, including developing his thesis of the right to the city (2003, 1995). Using Marx, Raymond Williams (1975) of course, gave more consideration to the cultural differences between the country and the city, pointing out our propensity to romanticize a pastoral life that never existed:

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People have often said ‘the city’ when they meant capitalism or bureaucracy or centralized power, while ‘the country’, as we have seen, has at times meant everything from independence to deprivation, and from the powers of an active imagination to a form of release from consciousness (291).

To fetishize rural life through nostalgia, however, only obfuscates capitalism and exploitation from the country, another example of what Miranda Joseph (2008) calls the “romance of community.”

Today, outside of certain sectors of human geography and rural sociology (see Munton 2008) we are hard pressed to find serious and sustained critical scholarship on the rural as a condition of social existence, as a phenomenological experience, as a modality of capitalism, or, most pertinent to this essay, as medium of – and for – communication.

Media and communication scholars are as guilty as their peers in other disciplines for failing to take seriously their own version of what Marxists call “the agrarian question” (Kautsky 1988; Mitrany 1951). To be fair, we have sustained conversations about rural broadband, the digital divide, the history of electricity in rural communities, and the uses of the telephone and radio, but we have seen little high-theory development. Even attempts towards a synthesis of geography and communication have largely neglected the rural (Adams 2009, 2016; Adams and Jansson 2012). This is in spite of some obvious questions that require answering. For instance, we know from two solid decades of research that rural communities lack the broadband infrastructure of their urban counterparts (FCC 2016). We also know that, as many have theorized, digital media in concert with advanced capitalism has fundamentally reshaped our relationships to place and space (Giddens 1990; Harvey 1991; Moores 2012; Meyrowitz 1985; Wilken 2011). But what about those locations with poor access to the means of ultra-modern communication? Those areas with poor mobile connections, inadequate satellite internet, and a dearth of digital options. In short, what does a rural relationship with space and place – both digital and analogue – look like in the twenty-first century?

This CARGC Paper is a first attempt to develop a critical theory of rural communication. In the end, it does not offer a concrete declaration of such design, but rather points the way forward by underscoring issues and subjects of which such a theory should engage. Drawing on critical scholarship in media and communication studies, political economy, critical geography, phenomenology, and mobility studies, this essay aims to point the way forward for a critical theory of rural communication. To a certain extent, much of this essay is about absence – what is missing in the fields of media and communication studies. The flip side to this, however, is that this essay is also about possibilities and the establishment of a new agenda for media studies, communication studies, and geographic communication studies.

I take as my starting point a critical epistemology, which not only helps me delimit the conceptual parameters, but also underscores a belief that we cannot understand communication processes – be they institutions, meaning making, or production – without understanding the

embedded power dynamics therein (Babe 1995). A critical theory, one close in conversation with geography, space, and place, rather than a generalized theory is required given that we already have an entire (albeit neglected) field dedicated to empirical issues in the form of rural sociology (Nelson 1969), and longstanding research in political science and economics.¹ There is also a robust discussion regarding rural telecommunications, rural development and the digital divide in terms of public policy and resource deployment (Gabe and Abel 2002; LaRose et al. 2007; Nicholas 2003; Parker et al. 1989). What is missing is a critical understanding of these issues from a humanistic perspective – one that has been missing since Marx himself. As Couldry and McCarthy (2004) aptly note:

A geographically informed and spatially sensitive analysis of media artifacts, discourses, and practices reveals forms of inequality and dominance, knowledge and practice that are hidden from other analytical techniques. Understanding media systems and institutions as spatial processes undercuts the infinite space of narrative that media appear to promise; it insists that our object of analysis is never just a collection of texts, but a specific and material organization of space (4).

Media and communication technologies obviously play a major role here. But the goal, as with all critical media theory, needs to be to develop a “materialist, non-media-centric” media theory (Morley 2009).² This is a more comprehensive theory, one that decenters “the media” and incorporates “the tradition of work which continues Marx and Engel’s concerns with the constitutive powers of systems of communication and transport” (Morley 2009, 114). Such an approach is dutifully needed for a theory of rural communication since we need to be thinking about how meaning is conveyed in everything from the soil itself, to grain elevators, and John Deere tractors – and the power dynamics that flow through and from these *technic* of communication (Peters 2015).

This CARGC Paper will proceed in a series of short commentaries, highlighting different areas, issues and subjects that encompass a critical theory of rural communication.³ These include the country and the city, space, and place, time, mobility, technology, media content, institutions and organizations, capitalism, and power. As a caveat, I will refrain from covering rural sociology and political science. Not only would this make the review exhausting, but it would detract from the aim of recounting a specifically non-media-centric media studies theory of rural communication. In the same breath, I also refrain from a sustained conversation with policy and the digital divide – two subjects that have been ably covered. A second caveat is that this review is heavily US-centric. One needs to start somewhere, and it is best to start with home – as the saying goes. Nonetheless, I hope that international readers will identify with these questions and commentary and be able to apply these observations to their own local

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¹ See the special issue of *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* in May 2016; see also Duncan 2015.

² See also Arjun Appadurai’s CARGC Paper (CARGC Paper 4) on the need to stop media studies from “develop[ing] into an enclave of high theory and high technology” (9).

³ I would like to thank Dr. Marwan Kraidy and the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communications for hosting me in the winter of 2017 through the CARGC Fellow program. Sincerest thanks also go out to Marina Krikorian for her tireless work and to my colleagues at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania for an intensive semester of study.

contexts. Students in global communication should pay more attention to those events, issues and conversations occurring at the sub-global and sub-national levels. The local (and the rural) can greatly inform our understanding of the global (Kraidy and Murphy 2008). Indeed, they cannot exist without each other (Dirlik 1999). Understanding the rural, therefore, is essential to better understanding the dynamics of our globalized and networked world.

To this end, my CARGC paper joins those few voices also in search of a “critical approach to the study of rural areas” (Thomas et al. 2012), “critical rural theory” (Phillips 1998), or, as Darin Barney (2011) calls it “critical agriculture studies.” Whatever the term, the desire is clearly present to start a conversation about critical approaches to the rural, both locally and globally.

The Country And The City

In his 2016 book *Geomedia*, McQuire strives to understand the relationship between digital technologies, public spaces, and the urban experience. He argues that emergent digital technologies “enable emancipation from place” while “also becom[ing] a key modality of contemporary *placemaking*. It is this paradoxical conjunction of connection and disconnection – of emplacement and displacement, of the articulation or joining of *the local and the global, of media and immediacy – that I am wanting to grasp with the concept of geomedia*” (McQuire 2016, 6). The catch, of course, is that geomedia is a distinctly urban experience. Art exhibits, geolocation on our phones, Google Maps, and the “right to the city” all depend on the city *sine qua non*. Geolocation software – everything from Google Maps to check-in functions – only work with advanced broadband connections – those connections are commonly found in cities and are lacking in rural communities, especially agrarian communities (FCC 2016).

To be sure, this “urbanormativity” is not a new phenomenon (Thomas et al. 2012). Instead, we have always been fascinated by cities (Lefebvre, 1996; Thomas et al. 2012). Guy Debord’s (1995) spectacles took place in the cities, as did Jane Jacobs’ (1961) research on urban renewal. We also have corresponding scholarship on the global scale, with scholars investigating and theorizing the global city (Sassen 1991). In 1967, French Marxist geographer Henri Lefebvre published his manifesto “the right to the city” which argues the right to public spaces and places in urban environments. That right, according to Harvey (2013):

Was both a cry and a demand. The cry was a response to the existential pain of a withering crisis of everyday life in the city. The demand was really a command to look that crisis clearly in the eye and to create an alternative urban life that is less alienated, more meaningful and playful but, as always with Lefebvre, conflictual and dialectical, open to becoming, to encounters (both fearful and pleasurable), and to the perpetual pursuit of unknowable novelty (x).

This obfuscation of the rural, and corresponding fetishization of the urban “essentialises a critique of the political economy of space to urban space at the neglect of the rural–urban dialectic” (Elden and Morton 2016, 58). Furthering this essentialization, not long after the right to the city, Lefebvre published *Marxist Thought and the City* (2016), an exploration of the power dynamics that make up the modern metropolis. In a passage worthy of greater attention by media scholars, Lefebvre (2016) asks: “What, then is the city?” He answers thusly: “Like the land of which it rests, it is a *medium*, an *intermediary*, a *mediation*, a *means*, the most extensive, most important of all” (69, emphasis in original). And he continues:

The transformation of nature and the earth implies another site, another milieu: the city. Although there is no “urban mode of production” any more than there is an “agrarian mode of production,” the city, or more precisely its relationship to the countryside, implements changes in production by serving as both *receptacle* and *condition*, site and milieu. In and around the city, nature yields to a second nature. In this way, the city traverses the modes of production, processes that begin once the urban commune replaces the community (tribal or agrarian), which is closely tied to the land. The city rather than the land becomes the great laboratory of social forces (69, emphasis in original).

Lefebvre intimates two important points here. The first is that we do not have a correlating point to this dialectic: “what, then, is the rural/country?” Second, that the rural exists to serve the city; the rural is the site of production and exploitation. Harold Innis predicted as much when he talked about the staples thesis in 1927. The staples thesis suggested that regional development was achieved at the expense of colonized countries (e.g. Canada) and for the benefit of the major international powers (e.g. US, UK). In the Canadian context, the hinterland was regarded as an unlimited set of resources (staples) for the UK and later the US. The political geography of Canada – from railways to cities – was established as a way to funnel resources from the interior to the colonial powers.

Today, the editors of the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* go so far as to argue that the rural has become colonized by the urban: “Rural areas are the site where resources are found and wastes are deposited” (Editorial Team 2016). Their concern is if this trend continues, the rural will become nothing but a place of exploitation, alienation, and of ridicule of those who live there – conditions that we are already experiencing today (Berry 2006; Thomas et al. 2012). The solution is to turn to the table on the urban, and see the rural not as the urban’s dialectical opposite, but as a place for opportunity, and understanding (Crabtree, 2016; Thomas et al. 2012). Noting that there has been a “brain drain” of small towns and a general migratory trend to cities along with a corresponding decrease in farm ownership, Crabtree points out that many small towns are experiencing growth and that there is a push to enable and encourage young farmers. “Rather than looking on rural areas and small towns as places of despair, we need to think of them as places of hope, if only the game could stop

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being rigged against the people who live there” (Crabtree 2016, 619). As I will demonstrate shortly, one way in which the system is rigged against rural communities is the market failure of broadband and advanced communication technologies more generally.

Space and Place

The urban-rural dialectic also plays out in the larger conversation regarding space and place – a conversation that has seen resurgence in recent years in media and communication studies (Ali 2017; Castells 2000; Moores, 2012; Meyrowitz, 1985). The driving question here is: does advanced capitalism and digital technology force us out of our traditionally defined places that we call home and into a “space” and state of placelessness (Entrikin 1991; Castells 2000; Relph 1980)? Meyrowitz’s answer to this in the 1980s was, a definitive yes. Giddens (time space distanciation) (1990) and Harvey (time space compression) (1991) echoed Meyrowitz in their responses as well. Distance shrunk and communication sped up; the discourse of McLuhan’s “global village” once again reigned supreme. Manuel Castells (1996, 2000) writes about a declining “space of place” while noting the growth of the “space of flows” – those dynamic and often non-material modalities of the network society. Wilken (2011) writes of “teletechnologies” which challenge our commonly held assumptions about local (as a geographically-based construct) and community (as a geographically-based construct).

These scholars lead us to ask, as Appadurai (1996) did twenty years ago, “what is the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized world” (52). As I argued in the introduction, global communication studies is incomplete without a consideration of the local, and, by extension of the rural (Dirlik 1999; Kraidy 2005). Theories of critical and comparative translocalism acknowledge as much with attempts to understand the global flow of people, texts, and ideas through multi-site comparisons at the local and regional levels (Calabrese 2001; Kraidy 2005; Kraidy and Murphy 2008). In the main, however, global communication studies has spent little time and space thinking, writing, and researching the sub-national, despite the realization that “a sense of commitment to the place where one lives remains a necessity even in the information age” (Calabrese 2001, 124). Said differently, we experience global technologies, imagery, economies, and ideologies at the local level – be it our home, school, work, grocery store, voting booth, or farm. It is time to realize that a comprehensive understanding of globalization and global political economy is unrealized without incorporation of the sub-national, the local, and the rural (where 46% of the world’s population, or roughly 3.3 billion people, reside (World Bank 2017)).

My own work parallels these issues and talks of the dialogic relationship of the local and the global, and of space and place (Ali 2017). My scholarship joins those interested in exploring the nature of the local, of place, and of space, all the while refusing to believe that neoliberalism or digital technology has annihilated any of these categories. Indeed, “place still matters” even if we now live our lives in a multitude of places, both online and off (Casey 2013). First and

foremost, we still live, work, shop, and most importantly, vote, in geographically-delineated places (Braman 2007). Equally, we now understand that places are not tethered exclusively to the geographic, they also comprise relationships and experiences (Dirlik 1999; Massey 2013). Places are phenomenological constructs, as much as they are geographical and social constructs (Tuan 1977). Communication and media help facilitate these constructs in numerous ways: face to face conversations provide us with a sense of neighborhood (Dewey 1927/2016); newspapers help us understand a geographically bound imagined community (Anderson 1991); both newspapers and broadcasting gave us a sense of ritual and habit; and now hyperlocal online news sites in concert with legacy media are providing for the critical information needs of communities (Napoli, et al. 2017). Place and, by extension, the local (as a combination of geography, community, and experience) is here to stay (Ali 2017).

To this last point, new strands of phenomenology challenge the notion that digital technologies bring about a condition of “placelessness” by reminding us that it is part of the human condition to create places in unfamiliar spaces (Moore 2012). Moore, for one, expands Paddy Scannell’s theory of the doubling of place to point out how media – both digital and analogue – allow us to be “here” and “there” at the same time.⁴ Extending Scannell’s original theory (which focused on broadcasting) to mobile media platforms, Moore argues “mobilities of various types, including those that are technologically mediated, are significant for the constitution of places in social life,” (Moore 2012, 106). Jason Farman’s (2013) work - also on mobility - has similar implications by focusing on the rise of location-based mobile platforms that allow us to “check in” or gain information about a particular local. For Farman, the body is not lost with digital technologies, but rather, is heightened:

Bodies always take up space, and, as Lefebvre argued, are spatial in and of themselves. Regardless, throughout the history of technology, we have attempted to distance bodies and spaces as much as possible. This dissection is particularly noticeable in the age of the mobile phone, in which we attempt to dislocate bodies from particular spaces and spaces from particular bodies (2013, 19).

Instead, Farman observes, mobile phones do just the opposite; re-inscribing place and the body – we create online places, just as easily as we use our phones to check our geo-location. “Geo-caching” a live treasure hunt facilitated by smartphones and broadband connections is the perfect example of re-inscribing place and the local into the digital:

In recent years, there has been a major transition in digital culture toward a focus on the importance of location. From location-aware technologies to a renewed interest in the role of proximity in online social interactions, site-specificity has gained a new foothold in the cultural and scholarly imaginary. Landscapes, it can be said, have become information interfaces much like the graphical user interface of a computer screen (Farman 2013, 43).

⁴ See also Elihu Katz’s (2014) paper “Commuting and Co-Authoring: How To Be in More Than One Place at the Same Time.”

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In sum, mobility scholars, and those adhering to what is known as “phenomenological geography” (Tuan 1977), teach us how we can be “in place” or “local” anywhere; anywhere with an LTE signal or a Wi-Fi connection, that is. This poses both a problem and a potential for research. The problem being that rural communities have disproportionately inferior broadband availability and mobile signals compared to their urban counterparts (FCC 2016). The opportunity is to study how mobility and mobile communication technologies allow for a sense of localness anywhere. One is struck, for instance, to look at images of refugees fleeing conflict zones carrying mobile phones (Sheller 2016). As Sheller poignantly writes in her CARGC paper, “a phone call seems like a simple thing, but imagine how hard it is while on the move as a refugee to have a working phone, with the numbers you need to call, a charged battery, power cords, converters and the right SIM card... What of our humanity do have to leave behind when crossing borders?” (Sheller 2016, 5). Twenty years earlier, Appadurai (1996) pointed out a similar connection between technoscapes and ethnoscapescapes – the simultaneous movement (forced or voluntary) of people and technology. I encourage us to ask how this intersection manifests in rural places. Already, for instance, scholars are investigating this through their interests in the roles mobile phones play in the lives of migrant rural workers in the United States (Jimenez 2016) and how changes in political economy and technology have ushered in a new era of critical journalism in Cuba (Morales-Suarez 2017).

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So, how does space operate in rural communities? In the urban setting, space, or, perhaps put better, the “space of flows” is about the ultimate accomplishment of the annihilation of space by time. Capital, ideas, technology, and even people flow seamlessly in this space – facilitated by desirable passports (from Western countries with few visa requirements), the right skin color, and the necessary wealth (Castells 2000). Halfacree (1993) argues that many prevalent definitions of the rural fail to understand the relationship between space and society. More specifically, that geographers, political scientists, and regulatory scholars fail to understand that space is both produced and is a resource (“a means of creating further spaces”) (Halfacree 1993, 248). As he writes, “when we consider (rural) space, we must not only consider the structures producing that space but also the way in which that space is subsequently used to produce other space and, fundamentally, to reproduce the original causal structures themselves” (249). Said differently, rural space needs to be considered as dynamic and dialectic as the space of flows, as urban space, or as cyberspace. Jimenez (2016, 11), illustrates this when observing how the ubiquity of the mobile phone amongst migrant workers not only facilitated place-making, but also an “informal job market for farm work.”

On the flip side, we must be mindful that the rural cannot be taken as synonymous with the agrarian and the farm (Thomas et al. 2012). In the United States, it includes Appalachian communities, southwest desert communities, West Virginia mining communities, small seaside towns in the upper Northeast and the isolated towns of the Dakotas (Ilbery 1998). In these places we should ask: Does the space of flows exist for and within rural communities where “space” might take on a very different meaning? When we study the rural, as Halfacree (1993) reminds us, we must study them “according to that which makes them rural” rather

than assume a universal experience (250). My work with Damian Radcliffe on the future of small town newspapers in the United States fits nicely within this set of questions. Through dozens of in-depth interviews with experts and practitioners and a nation-wide survey of small market journalists and editors we found a heavy reliance on the print product of newspapers as opposed to digital editions (Ali and Radcliffe 2017; Radcliffe and Ali 2017). This was particularly true for weekly-published newspapers (rather than daily). While our study did not focus on time-space relations and thus cannot comment with specificity, the popularity and resonance of weekly newspapers in small town America suggests a different relationship to time and space – greater distances and slower speeds. This, moreover, should not be interpreted as a critique. Many small market newspapers are embracing digital technologies – from Instagram to augmented reality – but others are biding their time and learning from large metro incumbents (Ali and Radcliffe 2017).

Focusing on the printed newspaper product also reminds us to focus not only on digital technologies, but analog and “legacy” communication. Scholars of community media, for instance, teach us how rural tin-miner communities in Bolivia make use of radio (Huesca 1995), how rural Colombian women make use of video (Rodriguez 2001), and how rural Mexicans use public phones (Jimenez 2016). These communicative practices should not be overlooked in an era of the digital and the global.

Communication Technologies

Given this prologue to technology, it is worth turning our attention to how a critical theory of rural communication incorporates communication technologies. Our first point of contact is the digital divide between rural and urban (Gabe and Abel 2002; Hindman 2000; Nicholas 2009; Strover 2003). We are often told, and I have often repeated in this paper, that even today there is a significant gap in broadband availability between rural and urban America. The current FCC broadband (2016) report notes that while 10 percent of Americans lack access to the current standards of 25mbps download/3 mbps upload, for rural America this number jumps to 39 percent. The report continues “the availability of fixed terrestrial service in rural America continues to lag behind urban America at all speeds: 20 percent lack access even to service at 4Mbps/1Mbps, down only 1 percent from 2011, and 31 percent lack access to 10 Mbps/1 Mbps, down only 4 percent from 2011.” Numbers get worse when we move from rural communities to farmland, where in 2012 only 70 percent of farms had internet access (Whitacre, Mark and Griffin 2014). Divides also exist in terms of internet adoption (rather than availability) (Sternberg et al. 2010; Whitacre Mark and Griffin 2014). As Whitacre, Mark, and Griffin write, broadband adoption is sometimes not even up to the farm: “As opposed to previous technology adoption that depended on a given farmer’s willingness or ability to invest, broadband adoption is externally constrained and potentially limits all farmers in a geographic area” (6).

This is an example of what is known as the “rural penalty” or the “distance penalty” (Nicholas 2009; Parker et al. 1989). This refers to the price – both material and figurative – that individuals pay to live at a distance from urban centers. This distance makes it more expensive to ship goods to rural communities than it is to ship to urban centers (Parker et al. 1989). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was actually hoped that telecommunications could bridge this distance gap, by shrinking the commercial space between rural and urban communities (Parker et al. 1989). This, of course, depends upon broadband networks – something that despite billions of dollars of federal grants and subsidies – has not yet been eradicated (Gilroy and Kruger 2012).

The lack of broadband availability is known to critical political economists as a market failure, for the commercial market sees little return on investment in wiring sparsely populated communities (Whitacre, Gallardo and Strover 2012). It is not worth rehashing the entire genealogy of scholarship on the digital divide, except to say that current conversations have shifted from questions of availability and access to those of adoption (Whitacre, Gallardo and Strover 2012). Earlier conversations also focused heavily on the relationship between advanced telecommunications and rural development (Parker et al. 1989).

The danger, however, is in assuming that the rural broadband experience is homogenous. Here, it is important to note the differences between what Nicholas (2009) calls “rural” and “remote” communities. Rural communities often have access to at least one broadband provider, while remote communities, especially farm communities, are often without availability. As Nicholas comments:

In terms of Internet access, the “rural penalty” can be usefully reconceptualized as a “remote penalty,” with the most remote towns least likely to enjoy the fruits of the communication revolution. Ironically, these policies often exclude the very residents that stand to benefit most from their effective implementation, paring away remote communities through a series of exemptions and requirements that test the abilities of even trained policy experts (264).

This rural-remote disjunction may be a new dialectic to complement the urban-rural dialectic noted in the early work of Lefebvre (2003) and others. “This general picture” writes Lefebvre, “encompasses contradictions (notably the intense struggle, throughout history, between large and small-scale farming) and survivals in the ideological (survivals of agrarian myths, folk traditions, etc.) and structural (the village, the peasant family, etc.) domains” (119).

⁵ “...precision agriculture is the application of information technology to farm-level production operations and management decision making. The focus of this technology has evolved over time: from mapping site-specific soil properties, to geo-referenced yield monitors, to variable rate applications, to automated guidance and, finally, to the more recent emphasis on ‘big data’” (Whitacre 2014, 1).

⁶ Up to \$383,500, according to Jon Brodtkin (2015).

⁷ “In order for precision agriculture to become standard practice by a critical mass of farmers, data transfer must become completely automated and passive such that no human interaction is required” (Whitacre 2014, 5).

Tractors, grain elevators, and railroads contribute to a critical theory of rural communication, as much as broadband infrastructure and mobile phones.

There has been a push in recent years by rural broadband advocates to get policy makers to pay more attention to these remote communities, with a particular emphasis on the development of “precision agriculture” – or the use of advanced communication technologies to assist in farming.⁵ Today, most new farm machinery comes equipped with modems that communicate to either a central hub or to other machines (known as machine-to-machine communication or M2M). This use of telematics helps determine everything from tilling patterns to soil moisture to seed distribution (Whitacre 2014). At the moment, however, broadband infrastructure – both wireless and wireline – is not robust enough to support a fully actualized precision agriculture system. As such, farmers must often either pay exorbitant sums to have their farms “wired” (Brodin 2015)⁶ or rely on flash drives and manually transport them from one machine to another and back to the primary home computer.⁷ For those invested in solving the market failure of remote broadband, getting policymakers to measure broadband availability not by population density but by modems or “cropland” would mean that farmers could finally get the attention they deserve and have money put into the construction of cell towers and middle mile connectivity (see ABC 2016).

A discussion of agriculture and farming equipment also brings up a neglected aspect of media and communication studies: moving beyond the traditional definitions of “media” and “communication technology.” In this case, the tractor itself is a communication technology – wirelessly connected to a network of machines, servers, and databases. The tractor – or combine or seeder – has become a meaning-making device, not just a piece of equipment. Farm equipment thus joins the grain elevator as part of what Darrin Barney (2011) calls “unconventional media.” These unconventional media “structure temporal and spatial experience” and, despite their relative neglect by scholars, underscore how “struggles over and around technological change become key sites for the distribution of power and resources, for the formation of political subjectivity, and for the unfolding of social and economic possibility” (Barney 2011, 7). As Barney continues, we often forget that the rural engenders a struggle over politics, progress, and tradition. Speaking of the grain elevator in the Canadian prairies, Barney argues:

Such accounts rarely, if ever, contemplate the politics of things like grain-handling technology and railway branch lines – a symptom, perhaps, of the systematic forgetting of the rural that characterizes most contemporary discussions of technology and politics, with the possible exception of those that press to extend the purported benefits of technological innovation to rural and remote areas (7).

Barney speaks to two key factors here: that a critical theory of rural communication must first and foremost internalize a non-media-centric (Morley 2009) epistemology, and that it must not exclusively focus on the shiny and new. Tractors, grain elevators, and railroads contribute to a critical theory of rural communication, as much as broadband infrastructure and mobile phones.

Media

At this point in this CARGC Paper, I would be remiss if I did not spend some time considering what an actual study of media content would entail in the context of a critical theory of rural communication. Though we need to be careful to ensure that the study of media content does not occur in a vacuum, but rather sits alongside socio-political-economic considerations (Morley 2009, 2007). We should consider media content in four capacities:

- 1) Content, most notably depictions of rural life (Thomas et al. 2012);
- 2) The role of local news in rural life and the critical information needs of rural communities (Napoli et al. 2016);
- 3) Media institutions and organizations providing rural news (Ali and Radcliffe 2017);
- 4) Audiences and everyday life approaches to media content (Cavalcante forthcoming).

In the first regard, studies of the depiction of rural life have been spearheaded by scholars in literature (e.g. Raymond Williams), geography (Adams), and sociology (Thomas et al. 2012). Many note here the discrepancies between representation and reality: what we see has been nostalgized, fetishized, and/or romanticized to point of unrecognizability. Williams (1975), of course, famously critiqued the representation of rural life in English literature and the longing for things past that did not actually occur, calling it the “myth of a happier past.” Adams (2009) calls this “place-image” and notes how “the reading of rural landscape is often interpreted as a form of deception – a lie that blinds one to the inevitable impermanence of all things (Smith 1993) or a ‘lie of the land’ that cloaks a grim place of toil in deceptive beauty (Mitchell 1996)” (149). He argues that a “progressive politics must destabilize the landscape aesthetic” – in essence suggesting a critical reading of rural place (landscape).

His point is echoed in Thomas et al. (2012) who see rural representation – both in its mediated and literal form – as simulacra. They find that many rural towns and communities shape their environment to meet the expectations of urban tourists. “Rural simulacra are urban creations that exist in order to perpetuate the myriad rural stereotypes” – these includes notions of the rural as simple and pastoral, the rural as wild, and the rural as a place of escape (p. 139).⁸ It is perhaps the rural-as-simple motif that we are most familiar with, seen in everything from *The Andy Griffith Show* to *Northern Exposure* to *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and *Corner Gas*. As Thomas et al (2012) continue “Ruralness is... treated as an idealized past to which many wish they could return. In a sense, the past of agricultural towns with low population densities and high ritual densities is treated as a once-existent reality – a paradise lost to which we now refer for a sense of authenticity” (69).

⁸ “With the concept of rural simulacra we are not referring to non-material media representations – though we believe these inform real simulacra – but the “real” material objects and artifacts that we encounter when we visit a physical location that convey a particular image or idea about rurality that may or may not have a basis or true physical point of origin” (Thomas et al. 2012, 139).

Critiquing the rural imaginary of urbanites and the “urban cultural hegemony” of contemporary society, Thomas et al. push for sustained critique of these representations and an understanding of rural life on its own terms, all the while understanding the dialectic relations between rural and urban. As communication and media scholars, our contribution can be exactly this, a systematic study of rural media. News and information ecosystems represent an excellent point of departure. In our recent study, Damian Radcliffe and I (2017) found small market newspapers are faring better than their metro and national counterparts. We argue for greater nuance, finding that there is no such thing as a singular newspaper “industry” anymore.

Studies of rural news and information ecosystems would also lead us to understand how rural people use and think of the media and technologies they consume. Similar studies have been done on how people use local news and information (Hess and Waller 2016), and how immigrant communities use local news to create a multi-local sense of being (Cheng 2005). There is precedent for such a study from the 1980s, where LaRose and Met (1989) analyzed the technological usage and attitudes of rural Americans. More recently, Whitacre (2014) looked at how farmers use advanced telecommunications technologies. The results are the same: when presented with the option, those in rural communities are as likely to adopt advanced telecommunications as their urban counterparts.

As noted, however, these studies of media content, of rural media organizations, and of rural audience cannot be done in a vacuum. More specifically, they cannot be done without understanding the social totality of our contemporary political economy. This, I address in the following section on markets, monopolies, and neoliberal capitalism.

Markets, Monopolies, and Neoliberal Capitalism

It has long been understood that agriculture in the United States suffers from a problem of monopolies (Lauck 2000; Kulikoff 1992). Farmland is increasing, while individual farm ownership has plummeted – indeed, the “family farm” is all but a myth in today’s rural political economy (Ferdman 2014). Moreover, most farmers make the majority of their yearly income performing non-farm related labor (CRS 2008). Equally, companies like Monsanto dominate the seed and fertilizer industry, creating a closed system of forced supply and demand. Similarly, the hog industry is now controlled by a few major conglomerates (Begemann 2016; Crabtree 2016; Wallich 2013). John Deere dominates the manufacturing and equipment industry, forcing farmers to pay not only for their hardware, but for the software as well (Koebler 2017; Wiens 2015).

There are monopolistic corollaries in the media industries as well (Bagdikian 2004). Three examples serve to illustrate this: media conglomerates, equipment manufacturers, and the aforementioned market failure of rural broadband. In the first regard, resurgence in media company acquisitions and mergers requires interrogation from the perspective of rural communities. This is seen most vividly in the examples of Gannett (newspapers) and Sinclair

(television), where rural media and rural voices – long neglected already by major media companies - may be in jeopardy (Ali 2017b). As of writing, Gannet owns well over 200 newspapers, many of which operate in small, rural communities (Abernathy 2016). In states where it owns dozens of papers, it has begun to centralize reporting and production under the banner of its “USA Today Network.” Now, many formally independent newspapers are seeing much of their autonomy stripped in the name of efficiency and centralization (Uberti 2017).

A similar situation is occurring in local broadcasting, where Sinclair Broadcasting Group – already the country’s largest owner of television stations – is seeking to purchase Tribune Media, upping their share of local television stations across the country to 215 (Guo 2017). Like Gannet, Sinclair cut its teeth in small markets, and the move to expand, in concert with new deregulatory measures of the Federal Communications Commission, will allow it to centralize or regionalize its local stations, especially for local news (Ali 2017b). At a time in which rural communities are rapidly becoming, what Ferrier et al. (2016) call “media deserts,” this rapid corporate expansion, coupled with a renewed policy philosophy of scopic deregulation, and the defunding of public broadcasting, could spell disaster for rural news and information ecosystems (Ali 2017).

On the subject of monopoly capitalism, Lefebvre (1956) argued that rural sociology long neglected the issue of ground rent and the divide between the capitalist farmer and the family farmer. Today, the newest agrarian landlord is not necessarily the farmer, but the equipment manufacturer. When a farmer buys a tractor from John Deere, for instance, what they are purchasing is merely the outer shell. Their purchase does not give them access to the technological architecture powering their tractor. In other words, they are contractually forbidden by copyright law from repairing their own tractor or accessing the onboard computer system (Koebler 2017). These prohibitions brought about a movement known as the “right to repair” (a twenty-first century agrarian corollary to Lefebvre’s “right to the city”) (Wiens 2017). The right to repair movement succeeded in convincing the Copyright Office to provide exemptions in copyright law that would allow farmers to repair their own tractors – including accessing the onboard computer software. In retaliation, John Deere now makes farmers sign a contract waiving this right – forcing them to rely exclusively on John Deere retailers for repairs and refurbishment (Koebler 2017). Violating this provision may result in the nullification of the warranty. In short, just as farmers of decades past merely rented land from capitalist landlords, twenty-first century farmers – even the affluent ones – are merely renting their equipment from the modern landlords of agriculture.

If markets are undergoing deep deregulation in broadcasting, and neoliberal expansion in equipment manufacturing, then they are certainly failing in rural broadband. More specifically, there is market failure in rural broadband and market abandonment in remote and farmland broadband. As noted above, there is little incentive for major telecommunication companies to expand into rural communities with sparse populations and poor return on investment. As

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a result, many rural communities are left with subpar internet options (such as satellite) or no options at all. Making matters worse, 21 states have enacted prohibitions or regulatory barriers to municipalities establishing their own broadband networks (Ali, 2017c).

This represents the latest iteration of uneven geographic development stemming from the entrenchment of neoliberal capitalism (Harvey 1989, 2005; Lefebvre 1991; Marsden 1998). Telecommunications monopolies stymie the diffusion of broadband and advanced telecommunications services (Brodkin 2016). In contrast, where cooperatives and municipal broadband have been established (and permitted) broadband reaches speeds unseen by the major telecommunication incumbents (e.g. 1 gig download), with prices far more reasonable (Brodkin 2016).

Power

Permeating all of these categories – and the ones not stated or simply implied – is the need to understand the power dynamics that flow through, constrain, enable, and foster, rural life and rural communication (Castells 2009). We have now seen how the rural is often depicted as a simulacrum of urban imagination, how the rural is often a place of exploitation, how it is a market failure, and a milieu of monopolistic corporate practices. These dimensions need to be understood vis-à-vis media and communications. What also needs to be understood are the more productive factors of power in rural life (Ali and Puppis forthcoming; Foucault 2000). What is being overlooked in the conversations and study of exploitation, monopolies, and urbanormativity? In other words, we need a phenomenological study of rural life and the incumbent power dynamics therein to understand how resistance is actualized in rural contexts. This includes everything from the right to repair to broadband cooperatives.

Conclusion

This CARGC Paper laid out some preliminary thoughts about a critical theory of rural communication; an aspect of high-level theoretical engagement that is lacking in communication and media studies. Indeed, in a moment of intellectual progression in which the local – both in terms of local media and in terms of *localism* – has seen resurgence in recent years, most notably as we try to rethink the concept of “place” in the digital age, it is lamentable that considerations of the rural have not followed suit (Ali 2017; Farman 2013; McQuire 2016; Moores 2012; Wilken, 2011). Having just published a book about the local and local media policy, I too am guilty of not considering the rural. This paper is my first attempt to rectify this omission.

Still, this is an incomplete attempt, and provides only a preliminary snapshot of the different dimensions a critical theory of rural communication needs to incorporate: space and place, country and city, communication technologies, media content, media markets, neoliberal capitalism, and multi-faceted considerations of power. One will note that politics, identity, policy and regulation, universal service, rural sociology, rural development, and community studies have all been left out. The next step will be to incorporate these categories. The step after that will be to take these interconnected elements and develop them into a comprehensive theory.

To do this, we need to keep two things in mind. First, to be careful not to fetishize or romanticize the rural, as we seek to better understand it. As Darin Barney (2011) writes of the grain elevator:

Technological changes often provoke nostalgic, anti-modern accounts of loss and decline, in which outgoing practices are romantically cast as somehow simpler, less technological, and more innocent than what succeeds them; this situation has been particularly true of the laments for the demise of the country elevator that have appeared in the press and popular literature, iconography and images.

The progressive and the nostalgic accounts of this transformation are both inadequate, however, as each in its own way effaced the actual history and politics of the transition from the country-elevator-and-branch-line system to the system organized around high-throughput terminals located on mainlines (11).

We cannot say that the rural is more local, more embodied, more sensorial, more daily, or more “real” than the urban or the global. But what we can say is that not enough attention has been paid to how these dynamics interact at the level beyond the city or town. Indeed, the answer to the question of “what does it mean to be rural in the digital age,” is “we don’t know.” The follow up answer should be: “but we’ll find out.”

The second thing we must be mindful of is making sure a critical theory of rural communication aligns with a “materialist, non-media-centric media studies” (Morley 2009, 2007). Here, Morley writes, “if improvements in the speed of communications are central to the time-space compressions of our era, emphasis has recently fallen almost exclusively on the virtual dimension (the movement of information) to the neglect of the analysis of the corresponding movements of objects, commodities, and persons” (2009, 114). A study of rural communication means putting “non-conventional media” front and center; it means thinking about grain elevators and tractors, not just as equipment but as meaning makers. It means developing, what Darren Barney calls “critical agriculture studies” that takes into account not only media and non-conventional media, but modes of transportation and infrastructure, flows of information, of a broad understanding of communication, and how all of these dimensions operate within the wider social totality. This, for instance, means incorporating geography of all kinds in to media and communication studies, from human geography, to critical geography, to phenomenological geography (Adams 2009, 2016; Adams and Jansson 2012). The dialectic

will also be central to this critical theory of rural communication. We have already encountered those of rural/urban and country/city, but in conversations of broadband we might also think of rural/remote as an emergent dialectic of critical rural communication. Equally, in the context of media production, it may be worthwhile to think through a rural corollary to local/global.

In the genealogy of media studies, the rural is often implied, but seldom confronted. Marx, of course, dismissed the rural, the Chicago school largely neglected it, but Innis revived it with his staples thesis. Later, Williams (1975) theorized the country/city dialectic, while Rogers (1962) and later Crain, Katz and Rosenthal (1969) acknowledged the rural their theories of the diffusion of innovation. Where the rural has been most prominent in media and communication studies is in discussions of telecommunications infrastructure, rural development and the digital divide. What is needed now is the completion of this trajectory through a holistic and critical theory of rural communication. "The soil has power," we are told, and it is about time that communication scholars paid attention to it.

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