MEDIA SYMBOLISM, KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND IMAGE CREATION OF TREE CHANGERS IN AUSTRALIA: TRACING THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW SOCIAL GROUP AND ITS IMPACT ON AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPES

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This research uses critical qualitative research methodology to analyse the cultural images and stereotypes in Australian news media in conjunction with “urban” issues and “tree changers” (TCers), an increasingly cited new social group. The aim of this media analysis is to identify components of the newly emerging, socio-historical and culturally specific phenomenon of “tree changing” (TC) as an Australian lifestyle option increasingly pursued to assuage dissatisfaction (social, psychological and physical) with city life and landscapes. Critical analysis of TC offers insight into some of the social and environmental challenges facing urban-rural politics, policies and practices. Thus, it is argued an interdisciplinary approach may best inform and equip planners, researchers and current/future residents about issues, expectations and possible confrontations demographic changes in urban and rural areas pose.

Several centuries ago, the advent of newspapers saw owners’ explicit use of newspapers for personal advancement of political and social views to effect content and increase purchase (Cunningham & Turner 1997). In the 19th Century, objectivity became a goal in news production due to increased advertising dependence and desire for broad market appeal. To avoid offending readers and turning away potential advertisers, newspapers adopted an ethic of impartiality and objectivity (Turner 1997). In contrast, this research understands news media as partial, non-objective social products:

“News is largely a product of history. And history of news since the 19th century has been the history of the translation from popular defined as ‘for the people’, to popular as ‘for the market’. Hence the way news is produced resembles in many respects the way commodities are produced. And one of the commodities newspapers like to produce is readers.” (Hartley 1982, p. 130).

The critical image Hartley portrays of newspapers is one providing advertisers with readers. The commodification of news production has changed considerably since inception in the early 19th century when the popular press was used for political radicalism and the creation of working-class consciousness (Hartley 1982). In contemporary societies, news production is an industry and part of the “big business” of media conglomerates. In the US during the 1960s, the rise of marketing and advertising research, culminating with the “culture of individualism” whereby
commodities, rather than reflecting alienated beings manipulated by powerful elites, signalled the height of individuality, saw consumption be equated with freedom of self-expression, choice and modernity. Compared with the 1950s single-market strategy, the 1970s ushered in a plethora of new products aimed at diverse market sectors which grew in the Eighties. These trends were rebuked in the Nineties as consumption continues to receive criticism in Western cultures as social trends shift to sustainability and “simple living” (Salt 2004).

News media reflect and create broader social trends and are deeply embedded in the process of cultural production. Culture in the broadest sense “includes all of the meaning-making systems, practices, and forms in a social formation - the prevailing truths as well as the contesting knowledges…both formalized and informal” (Hennessy 2000, p. 18). Conceptualizing media representation as a cultural product, affects what histories are produced. In sociology, mass media are “the most important forum for understanding culture impact since they provide the major site in which contests over meaning must succeed politically” (Gamson 1998, p. 59) and where issues are politically contested and influence exerted. The media does not merely report news; as a social institution it shapes culture. “Mass media…is not merely an indicator of broader cultural changes in the civil society but influences them, spreading changes in language use and political consciousness” (Gamson 1998, p. 60). By studying what qualifies as consumable products in the media, we may begin to question how the media influences how we act, think and feel, and the cultural artifacts we produce and desire.

TC, along with “sea change”, are "the buzzwords of the early 2000s” (Hele 2006) and represent such media-created cultural products which are socially, demographically and economically changing Australian landscapes. According to news media, a growing number of Australians are adopting social values characteristic of this increasingly-touted lifestyle. Yet, research shows reasons underpinning migration vary by location, time and cultural values. Studies (Burnley & Murphy 2004) identify the majority of metropolitan residents relocate to ‘perimetropolitan zones’, otherwise known as the suburbs, in close proximity to metropolitan cities because it offers commuting and greater living space options.

Academically-driven research refutes media images touting widespread popularity and historical relativity of TC. Ideology affects migration (Mullins 1995). The ideology of consumerism gained momentum from post-war economic growth providing more ‘ordinary Australians’ the material basis necessary to not only purchase a lifestyle, but also participate in the real estate market as owners and investors. Thus, homeownership and suburban values combined to impact residential mobility while Australia’s strong economy continues to be realised in brick-and-mortar. According to Bernard Salt, a key demographer producing knowledge about TC, ‘tree changers’ are those who swap the city for life in rural Australia (as cited in Larsen 2007). Similarly, ‘population turnaround’ and ‘sea change’ also refer to "the movement of Australians from metropolitan cities to non-metropolitan parts of the country” (Burnley & Murphy 2004, p. ix) and has been occurring for a while.

**Methodology**

This research seeks to inform policy and planning practices concerned with social perceptions and demographic/socio-cultural change by exploring some of the push/pull
factors of internal migration presented in one the most powerful and influential social institutions: the media (Jones & Jones 1999; Bourdieu 1998).

"Media text analysis is aimed at enhancing our understanding of the part media representations play within the wider construction of meanings within the culture… their importance lies in the way they filter and represent central social and ideological currents in our culture” (Cunningham & Turner 1997, p. 18).

Through application of qualitative methodology (Hartley 1982), this research provides a socio-historical snapshot of Australian culture, as presented by popular media in all Australian news articles for a 12 month period (N=56), between 1 June 2006 – 1 June 2007, covering descriptions of “urban” in association with TC. This is 61% of all news articles for this population appearing since inception in February, 2003 to 1 June, 2007 (where a total of 94 printed news articles mention the keywords “urban” and "tree change"). From the almost 700 Australian news articles in nearly 100 different media sources mentioning TC since 2003, just 94, about 13%, include the term “urban” (including “suburban”) in their discussions. These articles are derived from 23 media sources from state, regional and local news papers.

**Findings**

The socio-cultural adoption of TC, as a lifestyle and popular term, continues to increase. In Australia, the earliest newspaper discussion of urban issues and TC occurred as recently as 14 August, 2004, in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The article reported “a quiet revolution that is transforming our country cities” whereby "as Sydney overflows and bursts at the seams…the disaffected who are looking for new opportunities and new life... are leaving the pollution, strains, and costs of the city behind and taking up a "treechange" (Pryor & Lewis 2004).

Since 2004, Australia has increasingly embraced TC as historical reality. In 2004, 6 news articles mentioned “urban” and “TC”. In 2005, this grew to 27 articles, which remained relatively constant with 33 in 2006. With already 32 articles published between 1 January–1 June, 2007, the phenomenon is gaining popularity in news coverage, although “urban” as a term remains largely absent from the majority of TC news media coverage signalling potential need for increased dialogue about issues synergistically affecting rural and urban Australia.

By categorizing Australian culture, Salt (2007) offers stereotypes demonstrating how geography captures social values. These are useful to understand the symbiotic relationship between urban and rural residents. Individuals living in inner capital cities ("black-wearing latte-drinking single-living and couple-living people") and suburbs ("a peace-loving people content with their quarter-acre lots… middle Australia") constitute more than half of Australia's population (Salt 2007). A new group, the "outer-suburbanites" "number 1.7 million and are the fastest-growing tribe of all. This lot invented a new habitat, the McMansion…they commute. They own motorcars!" and, especially to inner-city dwellers, they are the antichrist (Salt 2007). TCers live in the space "from the edge of the land of the outer suburbanites to a distance of about 200km from the city centre” (Salt 2007) which is 2.4 million strong. According to a PRDnationwide study, "tree changers are generally out of the baby boomer generation,
often empty-nesters who are prepared to commute from their rural location as they move towards retirement” (Thompson 2007).

Two central themes reflect how TCers perceive/experience the disparity of infrastructure resources between urban and rural localities. These themes are a) push/pull factors of urban/rural life and b) commuting and proximity.

a) Push/pull factors of urban/rural life

TC is impacting urban and rural Australia in unprecedented ways, affecting macro-institutions (local economies, communities, and institutions, such as hospitals, schools and businesses) as well as micro-units like families and individuals. News media supply several re-occurring images of urban TCers’ experiences relocating to rural communities. These images often contrast with urban dwellers’ preconceptions and stereotypes about idyllic country living. Former city-dwellers relocated to the country cited in Derkley (2007) and Ryan (2007) consistently list unanticipated ways rural properties differ from suburban and city living including: limited water supply; fences, pasture and livestock performance; snakes and spiders; bushfires; cold winter weather; inconvenient garbage disposal; lack of public transportation and noise.

The toughness of rural life is a reality neither country nor city folk dispute. “Life is a bit tougher out here” says Mulley (Cuming 2006) about living and running cattle on 81 hectares in Mount Hunter. Even developers note drawbacks to country bliss, such as far and limited retail and social facilities (Allenby 2007), hospitals and emergency services (Thompson 2007) and transportation infrastructure (Allenby 2007; Thompson 2007). Infrequently, and not in national news, federal government constituents identify broadband problems continue to let down the needs of “outer urban communities” - to such an extent the Labour Party appointed a MP to lead a Parliamentary Broadband Taskforce in April, 2007 (Diamond Valley Leader 25 April 2007, p. 3).

In light of these rural realities, what stereotypical images cause urbanites to seek TC destinations? Topping the list is affordability (Derkley 2007; Granath 2007b; Granath 2006; Geelong Advertiser 12 August 2006, p. 3) as the price of city housing and interest rates make home ownership for many unaffordable. Coupled with fiscal reality is the grass-is-greener syndrome whereby migration is likened to a dating ad: "stressed urban dropouts seeks calm rural soulmate” (Kurosawa 2006). A plethora of direct TCer quotes offer insight into the cultural perception of “country living”. For many, the attraction is an image of the country as peaceful and quiet (Sunday Times (Perth) 21 January 2007, p.R22; Thompson 2007; James 2007; Chadwick 2007) and where one can escape neighbours (Chadwick 2007; Derkley 2007). A frequently cited push-factor for leaving cities is noise: the inner-city party next door (Derkley 2007). Yet, this quiet countryside image can be rudely shattered by squawking cockatoos, bleating sheep and bird-scaring guns (Derkley 2007).

b) Commuting and proximity

For many, the image of spending more time in the great outdoors is let down by the reality that "you are completely dependent on a car” (Kelly cited in Derkley, 2007). TCer Anderson comments, “You have this idea that you’re going to move to the country and spend lots of time walking. But then you find that you have to drive to get
anywhere - even if you want to take a walk” (Derkley 2007). Indeed, commuting is a major issue facing TC realities.

A common trend is increased reliance on commuting to translate the TC dream into reality. The centrality of a TC destination’s proximity, typically within 1-2 hours drive to the city, occurs in demographic definitions of TC (Salt 2004) as well as among the selection criteria imposed by many TCers (Derkley 2007). Property consultants agree. “The regional rural townships within one to two hours’ drive of the main cities... have been a very positive investment in terms of capital growth over the last few years” (Papaleo cited in Kaye 2006). As a self-proclaimed expert in understanding sea and TCers’ needs, the director of The Westland Group says it is because "those moving to the hills want to experience the lush-green environment in their everyday lives" creating a "genuine interaction with the environment without compromising it" is the most important factor developing for this demographic group (Betts cited in Sunday Times (Perth) 21 January 2007, p.R22).

Here lie some fundamental problems. First, it is questionable how an authentic "lifestyle" amid the wilderness can be achieved without fundamentally changing (via development, transportation infrastructure and all the landscape-altering changes modern amenities require, ie houses, cafes, hotels, shops, industry, etc. (Granath 2006)) the pristine landscapes which attract TCers in the first place. A second problem is the detraction growing populations to top TC locations pose to the future desirability of an area. If considerable numbers of baby boomers continue moving to the top cited TC locations (Salt 2006) to pursue their lifestyle dream "as a reward for a life of hard work" (Betts cited in Sunday Times (Perth) 21 January 2007, p.R22) then what will prevent deterioration into the suburban sprawl so common in the Northern Hemisphere?

The recent popularity of owning a 5 acre country estate is presented in the media as largely facilitated by property development. In Western Australia one development manager proclaims "you can also enjoy all the conveniences of city living such as underground power, telephone and Internet access" (Manners cited in Granath 2007a), in new TC locations. Another notes the trend of purchasing second properties “only 45 minutes from their city home and they get far larger acreage, an attractive property, an isolated bushland setting, virtually commutable distance” (Hegney cited in Granath 2007b). Contextualizing this within the current political climate eschewing excessive automobile usage due to increased public awareness and concern about climate change, it is perhaps surprising that a growing number of urbanites are readily taking on longer commutes in exchange for perceived lifestyle benefits. Reporting one family’s move to Thirlmere, the Sun Herald writes how a housing expert “now happily commutes up to 90 minutes to and from the city each day” (Singer 2007).

The shift to commuting is being embraced on Australia’s east and west coasts. As developers note, "people [are] travelling further to work so they can live in a nice environment. Travelling an hour to work in Perth is not beyond the realms of possibility.” (Manners cited in Granath 2007a). Yet, it is not just employees willing to commute long distances. According to Allenby (2007), Baby Boomers are commuting to their new rural locations for retirement and TCers in general are spending far more time commuting to built-up areas, retail and social facilities. Research by PRDnationwide concurs, showing drawbacks of commuting long distances are
perceived to be "outweighed by the green surroundings and relaxed environment of their rural location" (Thompson 2007).

It is not just TCers who are putting forth commuting as a viable alternative to increasingly expensive and crowded hotspots, like the Gold Coast and Byron Bay. Urban planning experts, such as Brendan Gleeson from Griffith University, are cited by the media as identifying specific locations, such as Casino, NSW, which offer "struggling home buyers and affordable housing option and increasingly good commuter links to Queensland" (James 2007). Such news is presented as agreeable with Casino’s Mayor, who is quoted believing the community has "felt for some time there is a tree change going on" (James 2007) and is planning to incorporate the lifestyle perks believed to attract TCers: alfresco dining and family services.

There exists need for broader engagement with this topic at both macro and micro levels. The implications migration holds for individuals, the environment, and the nation makes the introduction of broader communication desirable at this point in time. Specifically, there is a need for councils and planners, not just real estate agents and developers, to disseminate their planning and land management measures more broadly to attract and/or retain residents, as well as substantially inform how the current and future challenges demographic changes pose will be dealt with at both structural and individual levels. Only three articles sampled described how councils are responding. The first briefly cites The Remote Area Planning and Development Board’s assertion that very affordable housing and cheap commercial land in outback Queensland, along with rising interest rates, will facilitate the “decision to uproot from the urban sector and actually move to the remote and outback areas” (ABC 2006). The second article, a council in the town of Northam "stepped in and acted as developer, negotiated the sale and subdivision of the land and refurbished some homes and demolished others” (Granath 2006). This was reported as a “dramatic” improvement to the "eyesore" caused by the deterioration of 52 railway houses. Finally, the Townsville Bulletin (5 July 2006, p. 14) expressed approval in Thuringowa City Council’s concern that population growth, attributed to the TC phenomenon, might in adversely affect residents in terms of electoral divisions, and hence was planning survey residents. Hearing what major cities are doing in response to sea and TC, as well as learning what measures popular migration destinations are putting into practice, would largely augment the limited picture which qualifies as “news”. Additionally, there is need for rigorous academic and professional discussion and publication about this topic which, to date, yields no peer-reviewed publications in the majority of social science journals.

Discussion

This research has presented examples of stereotypes and images in contemporary Australian news media to draw attention to issues facing urban and rural communities regarding TC. These examples raise a number of questions. One may first ask if so many media and self-proclaimed TCers truly can claim the TCer title and identity while retaining strong connections (employment, social, etc.) with city life. As one TCer claims, “I don’t miss Leichhardt all that much because I do have to come into the city every day and I do get my fix of good coffee and the occasional business lunch” (Singer 2007). Identity politics aside, the TC movement appears to merely be extending the boundaries of suburban culture due to technological advances (ie telecommuting, rail, improved roads, etc.). Even so, the TC examples cited alert us to
concrete questions urban planners may ask when considering the retention of city employees, to both reduce out-of-town commuting traffic and keep rates and local consumption from leaving the city.

Australian cities in 2007 are experiencing an existential crisis. For some, like the increasing number of sea- and TCers, achieving meaning and finding community entails moving. The media, as a social institution, relies "on strategic mythologies, rituals, and official sources [to] produce a rather predictable worldview" (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 145) which has solidified, rather than dispelled, myths surrounding “country” and “city” life in Australia. Driven by advertising, capitalism and the property market, news media stand to benefit from promoting some cultural images more than others. Therefore, a fundamental research question to ask is: Why are a growing number of urbanites reaching such heightened levels of discontent that they are willing to add the equivalent of two extra working days to their full-time job to avoid living in or near cities? As Singer (2007) reports one TCers’ noted, “while commuting may seem arduous for some, leaving the city on a Friday for a couple of days in the country, with nothing but kids and animals to worry about was a ‘luxury’ ”. But, what is it about “the country” that makes it so appealing to some? And, why does it matter if you can “actually see the stars in the sky at night” (Lau in Allenby, 2007)?

Mentioned at the onset of this study was the dialectical relationship between urban and rural Australia. A review of news articles discussing TC has revealed more of a symbiotic relationship between urban and outer-suburban Australia than between urban and truly “rural” regions given the proximity of TC locations to city centres. If TCers are moving less for "rural landscapes" and more for reasons associated with social capital, then there is hope that Australia’s cities can work to alleviate its residents’ malaise by reinvigorating a sense of community, identity and meaning in its populations. However, if cities and their peripheral towns find it mutually beneficial for a proportion of residents to live up to 1-2 hours away and commute for amenities and/or employment, then greater emphasis must be placed on transportation infrastructure and environmental cost.

References


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