



# *Perceptions of Rural America:*

## **Media Coverage**

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## **About The Center For Media And Public Affairs**

The Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) is a nonpartisan research and educational organization which conducts scientific studies of the *news* and *entertainment media*. Since its formation in 1985, CMPA has emerged as a unique institution that bridges the gap between academic research and the broader domains of media and public policy. Founded by *Drs. Robert and Linda Lichter*, CMPA has become an acknowledged source of expertise in media analysis.

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**Table of Contents**

Executive Summary .....Page ii  
Introduction .....Page 1  
Sample and Methodology .....Page 2  
Topics .....Page 4  
Land Use .....Page 5  
Crime.....Page 6  
Politics.....Page 8  
Employment and Economic Issues.....Page 9  
Lifestyle Issues .....Page 11  
Environment .....Page 13  
Health Care .....Page 13  
Education .....Page 15  
Sources .....Page 16  
Appraisals of Change .....Page 18  
Frames.....Page 21  
Agricultural Frame .....Page 23  
Backwards Frame .....Page 25  
Lake Wobegon Frame .....Page 27  
Conclusion .....Page 30

The following report is part of project seeking to understand how various groups perceive rural America, its challenges and strengths. This report, prepared by The Center for Media and Public Affairs, looks at how certain news organizations report on rural America. Other reports include a set of in-depth interviews with rural, urban and suburban Americans, interviews with members of Congress, a survey of state legislators and an analysis of how rural America voted in the 2002 election. All of these reports can be found at [www.wkcf.org](http://www.wkcf.org).

## **Executive Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine how our urban national news media portrays rural America today. We analyzed such building blocks of news coverage as the events and issues making news, the sources quoted, and the opinions they expressed about the current and future state of life in rural America.

Images of rural America were also communicated through choices of descriptive language and narrative style that can produce an overall framework for understanding rural life. In search of that framework, we examined the coverage for the presence of three frames identified in previous research - an agricultural context for discussion, a negative frame of an impoverished and backward environment, and a positive frame emphasizing the charm or quaintness of rural life as a respite from urban ills.

We conducted a content analysis of news coverage during the six month period from January 1, 2002 through June 30, 2002, in a sample of major newspapers, news magazines and television networks. The print sample included all news in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Newsweek*, *Time* and *U.S. News and World Report*. The television sample consisted of all morning and evening news shows, including prime time news magazine programs. Using the Lexis/Nexis service, we identified 337 stories that used the word “rural” from these outlets in the context of discussing the lifestyle, conditions, or problems and issues related to a specific rural area or to rural America in general.

We found that the media frequently used the term “rural” to describe areas that are facing urbanization and are trying to preserve their rural past or atmosphere. Thus, land use issues were the most heavily covered topic of newspaper and magazine stories. We found extensive coverage of ex-urban counties encroaching on open countryside. This news agenda often left implicit the substantive characteristics attached to rural conditions or lifestyles. In keeping with this emphasis on urbanization, change was often equated with loss. Most sources who expressed opinions either opposed changes in their communities or accepted them as inevitable, and almost all predictions of the future were negative or fearful.

On television the term “rural” was most frequently used in connection with criminal activity. A remarkable 78 percent of discussions of rural life on television news dealt with crime. Much of this coverage reflected television coverage of the single criminal case, the bombings of mailboxes in the rural Midwest.

By contrast, rural life was relatively rarely associated with agriculture, despite coverage of the Farm Bill that was being considered by Congress. Fewer than three percent of all sources who were cited had any connection to agriculture, and only one out of six stories was framed in terms of agriculture or farming.

No strong framework emerged from the review of stories. Only one out of every 12 stories contained frames that pictured rural life as the kind of quaint and charming place conjured up by Currier and Ives prints or Garrison Keillor’s stories about the fictional residents of Lake Wobegone. These were roughly balanced by the one out of ten stories that framed rural America as an economically challenged or socially marginal environment. Even the association of rural life with farming or other agricultural frames occurred in only one out of every six stories. The stories were indeed all over the map.

Thus, the media presented rural America as a vestige of our past facing an uncertain future, a place being buffeted by its close encounters with the physical and cultural mainstream of contemporary urban society. It was not associated with agriculture so much as open space and the real or imagined qualities of small town living. The coverage was largely episodic, failing to contextualize events in terms of the broader qualities or issues associated with rural life. As portrayed in the media, rural America is a nice place to visit, but you wouldn’t learn enough to decide whether you wanted to live there.

## Introduction

The division of society into “urban” and “rural” has long been a powerful framing device, a way of telling a story and communicating values about different ways of life and world views. When we encounter the term “rural,” it acts as a cue for a series of cultural models, that have been built on the selective but frequent use of metaphors and symbols. These models, having evolved over time, are complex and sometimes contradictory. The cultural narratives behind the word “rural” trigger images of a simpler, slower, safer existence as well as a hardscrabble struggle in a harsh environment. The ideas of tightly-knit communities and close family life coexist with those of rugged individualism and the freedom of the frontier. Rural pastoralism suggests a more natural way of living, while rural isolation can suggest backwardness or intolerance, and by representing the opposite of “urban,” the term “rural” signifies both escape and something to be escaped from.

There can be little doubt that American mass media have played a significant role in building and decorating these frames. From the late nineteenth century dime novels that depicted the winning of the Wild West, to the “horse operas” that dominated the early days of television entertainment, to the big screen epics of John Wayne and John Huston, entertainment has idolized the rugged individual battling nature and human venality in the untamed west. More recent pop culture products like the television series *The Waltons* and *Little House on the Prairie*, along with cinematic hits like *Places in the Heart* and *The River*, have presented warmer, more personal tales of rural Americans overcoming adversity and upholding traditional values. Even fluff like *Petticoat Junction*, *Green Acres* and the *Dukes of Hazzard* have played a role in our collective associations with rural America.

The influence of this pop culture diet can be seen in the results of research presented in *Perceptions of Rural America* and conducted under Kellogg Foundation auspices. Those interviews revealed four central themes that have run through a voluminous list of books, movies and TV shows: rural America is primarily agricultural, and rural America symbolizes American values, rural areas are peaceful and serene, rural areas are friendlier and safer than the rest of America.

The broad research question addressed by this study was to examine how an urban national news media frames rural America today. Are news stories framed by simplistic images inherited from pop culture, or do they present more nuanced or objective portrayals of rural America? By examining such concrete aspects of coverage as the events and issues that made news, we can begin to understand coverage of rural areas. We also went further with our analysis by capturing opinions about the current and future state of life in rural areas. Finally, while such component pieces of information are crucial to understanding the news, images of rural America are also communicated through choices of descriptive language and narrative style that can produce an overall gestalt or framework for understanding rural life.

## Sample and Methodology

The period we studied ran from Jan 1, 2002 through June 30, 2002. The sample was intended to represent major newspapers, news magazines and television newscasts. Specifically, we included all news broadcasts in the following: ABC “World News Tonight”, ABC “20/20” (all editions) ABC “Prime Time” (all editions), ABC “Downtown”, ABC’s “Good Morning America”, CBS “Evening News”, CBS “60 Minutes”, “60 Minutes II”, CBS “48 Hours”, CBS’s “The Early Show”, NBC “Nightly News”, NBC “Dateline” (all editions), NBC’s “The Today Show”; as well as news printed in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Newsweek*, *Time* and *U.S. News and World Report*. All but the *Chicago Tribune*, a major regional paper, wield a national influence.

Following the parameters set by the Kellogg Foundation, our sample was based on the appearance of the word “rural” within these narratives. Using the Lexis/Nexis service we identified over 2900 stories that used the word “rural” from the outlets selected during the study period. Of those, about 10 percent (297) were about rural places in foreign countries and were dropped from the analysis. We also removed from the analysis any duplicate stories that appeared in different editions of the same paper.

The remaining stories were examined to sort out those that contained a substantive link to rural America from those that merely mentioned the word “rural” in a non-substantive context. For a story to be coded it had to meet one of the following criteria:

- It discussed issues that faced a rural community or area (e.g., the impact of the farm bill, efforts to create rural jobs, debates over land use).
- It examined the impact rural life may have had on one or more individuals (e.g., how Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor’s early years on a New Mexico cattle ranch shaped her life).
- It looked at how life differed in rural areas from urban areas (e.g., the pace or style of life, the presence of Starbucks etc.).

Most stories that didn’t make the cut missed by a significant margin. There may have been a brief mention of the word rural, but the article did not connect it to the point of the story. For instance, the following *Washington Post* (5/29/02) music review didn’t make the cut, because it contained only one brief mention of musical styles identified as “rural:”

Corey Harris’s new CD, “Downhome Sophisticate,” isn’t what you’d expect from a musician well versed in traditional blues. Unless it’s someone who also has a passion for the music of Jamaica and West Africa, the rhymes and rhythms of rap, the sensuous allure of Afro-Caribbean dances, the horn-charged funk of James Brown and the fiery, guitar-driven sonics of psychedelic rock.

“Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning,” the spiritual admonition that Harris included on his acoustic debut album, is recast on “Downhome Sophisticate” as an electrified sermon – a growling, harmonized oration accompanied by a shower of guitar sparks. And Harris’s hands show no signs of diminishing muscle memory when it comes time to milk a pentatonic scale for all it’s worth, as he proves on “Money on My Mind” and other tunes that embrace either urban or rural blues styles. What really distinguishes his new album, though, is the sharp contrast between exhilarating romps and enticing interludes.

These sampling procedures yielded total of 337 news stories, as Table 1 shows. The bulk of these stories appeared in the four daily newspapers. The *New York Times* lead with 85 stories, the *Washington Post* was close behind with 80, and the *Chicago Tribune* added another 76. *USA Today* trailed far behind these three with only 24 stories. This disparity reflects the fact that *USA Today* is distributed nationally and lacks a particular city or metropolitan area as a home base. Although the other papers are nationally influential, this study frequently tapped into coverage of their local and regional markets. In addition, *USA Today* appears only Monday through Friday.

Coverage at the three weekly news magazines also reflected the limitations of their purely national perspective. They combined for only nine stories among them, about one every three weeks on average. Finally, the coverage was also light at the broadcast outlets. Their morning, evening, and prime time news shows combined for only 62 stories. It was distributed almost evenly – 22 at ABC, 22 at CBS, and 18 at NBC.

Table 1

<b>Number of Stories</b>	
<b>News Organization</b>	<b>Number of Stories</b>
New York Times	85
Washington Post	80
Chicago Tribune	76
USA Today	25
Newsweek	4
Time	2
U. S. News and World Report	3
<b>Subtotal Print</b>	<b>(275)</b>
ABC	22
CBS	22
NBC	18
<b>Subtotal TV</b>	<b>(62)</b>
<b>Total Stories</b>	<b>337</b>

## Topics

The most frequent topics of coverage of rural America were land use (24 percent) and crime (20 percent), followed by politics (15 percent), unemployment (13 percent), lifestyle (11 percent), the environment (six percent), health (six percent) and education (four percent). (A single story could deal with more than one topic, so the percentages do not sum to 100.) But these overall figures conceal as much as they reveal, for there were significant differences in coverage depending on whether the news medium was television or print.

In print, the dominant issue was land use, which was discussed in 29 percent of all articles. By contrast, land use issues were completely ignored by the network news programs. The differences in issue orientation between the two mediums are shown in Table 2. The differences among the print outlets alone appear in Table 3.

Table 2

<b>Rural News Issues (%)</b>			
	All	TV	Print
<b>Crime</b>	20	78	7
Violent (14)			
Drugs (2)			
<b>Land Use</b>	24	0	29
Planning (13)			
Loss of Farms (2)			
Sprawl (5)			
<b>Politics</b> 15 2 17			
Farm Bill (6)			
<b>Employment</b>	13	9	14
Economic Development (4)			
<b>Lifestyle</b>	11	6	13
<b>Environment</b>	<del>6</del>	<del>0</del>	<del>7</del>
<b>Health</b>	6	6	6
<b>Education</b>	4	0	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>99%</b>	<b>101%</b>	<b>98%</b>
<b>N</b>	<b>306</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>252</b>

Note: Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding error.

Table 3

Rural News Issues - Print Outlets (%)						
	New York Times	Washington Post	Chicago Tribune	USA Today	Magazines	All
Crime	13	4	4	12	33	7
Education	6	9	1	0	0	5
Health	4	3	10	0	33	6
Lifestyle	13	16	5	29	22	13
Employment	30	10	12	12	0	14
Land Use	4	34	47	0	0	33
Politics	23	17	13	29	11	17
Environment	<del>6</del>	<del>6</del>	<del>8</del>	<del>18</del>	<del>0</del>	<del>5</del>
Total	99%	99%	100%	100%	99%	100%
N	47	96	83	17	9	275

Note: Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding error

## Land Use

This issue was covered most heavily by two print outlets, *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Washington Post*, reflected local concern about land use decisions in counties ringing these metropolitan areas. It was an issue totally ignored by the television outlets in our sample. There was little discussion of sprawl *per se*, but the idea often underlay concerns about land use. In *The Chicago Tribune*, which ran nearly half (47 percent) of all stories on land use, the news frequently concerned local counties and towns incorporating new areas, in order to better control what would happen to the land. In almost every case, the fundamental concern was about a nearby city expanding outward. The actions of Will County, which is east of Joliet and just south of Chicago, were typical of those covered in the *Tribune*.

By clustering the growth considered inevitable in Will County around municipalities and in ways to promote open space, the area can have the best of both the urban and rural worlds, officials say.

That growth will be guided now by a revised land use-resource management plan adopted last week by the County Board. It was put together over 18 months and with the help of the public and local planners.

Board member Terri Ann Wintermute (R-Bolingbrook), who chaired the Land Use Committee, touted the “conservation design” approach that groups homes and roads and provides for existing natural areas to be set aside as permanent open space areas. Density is unchanged, she said, but open space becomes part of an unincorporated subdivision.

“Through conservation design, we can save tree groves and set them aside and develop around them,” she said. “People are still going to come to Will County, but it will be better if they live with a tree grove here or a bike trail there. We’re going to have the quality-of-life things that people like.”

“The plan is designed to steer growth toward the municipalities and away from rural areas, an approach endorsed by local planners,” said chief county planner Tyson Warner. (4/21/02)

In the *Washington Post*, which contained 34 percent of land use stories, the news focus was on local counties in Maryland and Virginia that took action to preserve rural areas or create rural zones that would close off suburban development. Counties that had failed to adopt stricter zoning were held up as an example of the negative consequences. There was also some discussion on what should be preserved from a rural heritage and how the preservation should be accomplished.

## Crime

For television news, crime would seem to be the only thing in rural America worth talking about. Seventy-eight percent of TV news stories in our sample focused on crime. One crime in particular, the Midwestern mailbox bombings, took the lion’s share of coverage. There was an average of over two stories a day per network on the bomber in the early part of the summer. The first typically aired during the morning shows, and the second provided an update on the evening news. The following story from the NBC “Today Show” is typical of the daily coverage:

ANN CURRY, anchor: US postal workers are on alert this morning. More than a dozen pipe bombs have been found in the mail in recent days in the Midwest. NBC’s Pete Williams has details now.

PETE WILLIAMS reporting: The postal service vows to deliver the mail today in rural Illinois, Iowa and Nebraska while investigators work to find out who planted a string of pipe bombs that turned up in the past three days. Six people were hurt by bombs discovered Friday in Iowa and Illinois. More than a half a dozen more bombs were found over the weekend in Nebraska. None went off and were safely destroyed.

Investigators believe all the bombs have a common origin because the same letter accompanied several of them. The rambling, anti-government message seems to indicate that the bomber intended to kill to get media attention and says, quote, “more attention getters are on the way.” The FBI appealed for further word from the bomber without any more violence.

Mr. WEYSAN DUN (FBI): You have our attention. We're actively listening. We would encourage that commun – that communication to take place without any unnecessary risk or injury or loss of life.

WILLIAMS: As an added precaution, the postal service says it will deliver mail today to rural customers in the three states hit, but only if they leave their mail-boxes open. Pete Williams, NBC News, Washington. (5/6/02)

Lest this particular crime's ability to generate so much coverage appear anomalous, it is worth remembering that the homophobic killing of Matthew Shepherd in Laramie, Wyoming (21 TV stories) and the racially motivated dragging death of James Byrd in Texas (22 stories) also generated disproportionate television coverage in previous years. Both stories were framed in terms of their occurrence in America's heartland, which added to their horror.

The only other crime story to merit continuous network news attention during the sample period was the trial of David Westerfield for the murder of Danielle van Dam. In sharp contrast, most newspapers and news magazines rarely framed the mailbox bombings within a rural context. In general, crime was accorded much less significance in print. In print outlets, crime amounted to only seven percent of the overall coverage of rural issues.

Apart from violence, crime news also focused on the drug problems facing rural communities. There were two main threads of stories on illegal drugs. The first was the spread of drug production and distribution facilities from cities to rural areas, as dealers were lured by a low police presence and the seclusion offered by rural sites. The second looked at a boom in the use of drugs such as methamphetamine and oxycontin. "Meth" use, in particular, soared as production facilities moved to rural areas, and local youths discovered that it offered a cheap high. Most of these pieces pointed out the surprising places where you could find methamphetamine users, as well as how embedded meth use had become in rural communities. As with land use issues, drug use was often portrayed as a threat to traditional rural values or lifestyles.

"It all started when Bill London, a state game warden, stopped a man for fishing illegally in a pond in this rural, mountainous area north of Boise and found he had a ball of methamphetamine, the size and color of a Ping-Pong ball.

Mr. London did not like it that some of the drug dealers who have invaded rural Idaho in the last few years were hanging out at the pond, spoiling the fishing for families. So he went to the local judge, Patricia Young, who was looking for new ways to combat the spread of drugs, violence and poverty in her county. They came up with a plan: instead of sending people with minor criminal charges to jail, the judge would sentence them to fix up the pond.

Some contractors caught poaching elk had to donate their time and heavy equipment to build a sand beach beside the pond. People stopped for drunken driving were ordered to plant trees and flowers and water them with buckets carried by

hand from the pond. Others were ordered to build a volleyball court and a sheltered picnic bench. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game deepened the pond and restocked it. The fishing was so good and the pond so attractive that “the dopers left and the sportsmen and families came back,” Mr. London said. (New York Times 3/4/02)

## Politics

Once again, there was a striking contrast between print and television news coverage of rural politics: TV news just wasn't interested in civic life in rural America. Almost all of the political discussion in our sample took place in print sources, notably *USA Today* (29 percent of the total print coverage) and *The New York Times* (23 percent). The most significant story covered in 2002 was the farm bill that was before Congress. Forty percent of all political coverage examined the successful passage of what many sources described as flawed legislation. Many stories also pointed how the rural Midwest commands a significant number of votes in the Senate. With many of those seats up for grabs in the next election, journalists noted, everyone wanted to make deals that would make rural constituencies happy.

The measure passed 58 to 40 with nine Republicans joining the Democrat majority, and it stands in stark contrast to the House farm bill approved last fall. That bill gives less money to conservation and nutrition programs, places no limits on individual subsidy payments and gives an additional \$9 billion to commodity subsidies over a decade.

Lawmakers will try to reconcile the two versions in conference, which is expected to last several weeks.

Senator Tom Daschle of South Dakota, the majority leader, had pushed to pass a bill before midterm elections, and today he praised the Senate's version of the farm policy.

“This bill provides certainty for producers, an increased commitment to conservation, expanded nutrition, provisions making farmers and ranchers more competitive, and needed assistance for rural development,” Mr. Daschle said.

For his part, Senator Trent Lott, the minority leader, portrayed the Senate farm bill as “the most partisan” in his memory. But many of the votes seemed determined as much by geography as by politics.

Western senators of both parties worried about restrictions on water and packing houses. Southern senators complained about restrictions on subsidy payments.

Senator Blanche Lincoln, Democrat of Arkansas, voted against her party to protest payment limits that fell most heavily on rice and cotton farmers.

The two Republican senators from Maine broke ranks with their party leaders to support the bill's conservation measures and a \$2 billion dairy program that replaces the Northeast Dairy Compact.

Finally, the senators from Iowa seemed to be acting in tandem even though they sit on opposite sides of the aisle. Senator Charles E. Grassley, a Republican, wrote the amendment to limit subsidy payments and another to prohibit meat packing companies from owning their own livestock. (New York Times 2/14/02)

Stories on the farm bill also described how Midwesterners collaborated with Southern cotton and peanut interests to reshape the amount and distribution of subsidies, so that every possible constituency got something. Even urban lawmakers got a boost in food stamp allocations, while environmentalists got more money and better rules on farmland conservation programs. That was the template for almost all the stories on the farm bill (and most stories about politics in general). Stories about more local political issues, on the other hand, were rarely to be found.

## **Employment and Economic Issues**

Thirteen percent of all coverage of rural America examined employment and other economic issues. The topic represented 14 percent of all rural coverage in print (led by *The New York Times*, which accounted for almost a third of the news on this topic) and nine percent of all coverage on TV news. Such coverage can be illustrated by the following *New York Times* piece, which was particularly wide-ranging in assessing the rural economy.

All along the nation's back roads, hundreds of towns like this one are teetering in the recession, and some worry that they may never recover. Uranium mining has stopped in Falls City, Tex. In Loving County, Tex., oil exploration has stalled.

For farmers in Pima, Ariz., and Bartow, Ga., cotton prices have sunk to 30-year lows. Here in Brady, the ranchers who raise goats for angora wool are victims of low prices and competition from New Zealand and Argentina. Stretched across the southern tier, from Arizona and New Mexico through Texas and Georgia and into Virginia, these small rural communities form the base of the national supply chain. They produce most of the oil and much of the ore, fiber and food. In past recessions, even if they did not bounce back entirely, at least they survived.

But this time around, as the overall economy begins to show some signs of healing, things are ominously different in many of these towns.

Since the last recession, in the early 1990's, China, Russia and the former Soviet republics have charged into the world's commodity markets. At the same time, new trade agreements have erased quotas and tariffs that long insulated United States industries from foreign competition.

While freer trade benefits American consumers and industries that can now buy cheaper imported commodities, it has been rough on the places whose livelihoods depend on raw goods. For these already-struggling communities, the first post-globalization recession may break the old sequence of boom-bust-boom, and erase any hopes of long-term survival. (2/16/02)

Discussions of unemployment, failed efforts to attract non-farm jobs, the loss of family farms and efforts at rural/small town redevelopment are also part of this category. Unemployment and a lack of well-paying, quality jobs was often the starting point in discussing the woes of rural America. Not surprisingly, these issues often led to the emigration of people from small towns and rural areas. This trio of topics usually appeared when people lamented the death or decline of their small town. This category was the largest repository for bad news about rural America. It is interesting to note that these issues almost never came up in discussions of exurban counties, which can be taken as evidence that they are a world apart from "real" rural areas.

Rural redevelopment efforts came up occasionally in the news coverage. Often these efforts proved controversial and were either blocked by other landowners or regulations. For instance, there was a plan to create a stump dump in a Maryland county near Washington, DC that met stiff opposition from suburbanites who objected to the land being used for such purposes. Similarly, plans for the port of Charlotte, North Carolina to expand onto a rural, largely undeveloped island were opposed by wealthy landowners, who had built mini-estates on part of the island. Other redevelopment efforts were mentioned only to point out their failures, or to note that the community was still waiting to see what effect they would have. *USA Today* offered one of the few pieces to see a bright spot in rural redevelopment.

Venture capital funds, long concentrated in Silicon Valley and other tech hot spots, are spreading fast to low-tech places.

In those areas, there are now 62 funds, with most begun in the last five years. The latest: Adena Ventures in Athens, Ohio. With \$ 34 million, Adena last month became the first venture capital fund backed by a new Small Business Administration program to create jobs in areas venture capitalists often snub.

VCs invest for institutions and wealthy individuals. Their money is critical to young companies that create jobs and innovations. VCs like to be close to their investments so they can better monitor progress. As VCs spread, their economic impact widens, and more out-of-the-way companies get start-up money.

The new VCs also profit in rural areas, because labor, rent and other costs are 62% less than in the top venture markets, says Village Ventures in Williamstown, Massachusetts. (5/6/02)

## Lifestyle Issues

This is a wide-ranging category that covered general discussions of life in rural America and, as it turned out, the joys and charms of rural living. Examples included a *New York Times* article on the pleasures of a country inn in New England, and the following excerpt from the *Washington Post* on the relaxing nature of a rural retreat in the Catoctin Mountains.

But the minute we drop our down pillows in the Ole Mink Farm Recreation Resort in the Catoctin Mountains near Thurmont, Md., I realize that nature needs some serious space to work its soothing powers. A backyard begging to be mowed and trimmed is not a miniature forest after all.

Sitting by an oversize pool surrounded by forest, where the two girls we've brought are the only humans in sight, my husband and I feel tension we weren't aware we had draining away. Noting that we are just miles from Camp David, he says, "Well, this place works for presidents, why not us?"

I'm surprised by how rural and remote this area, just 15 minutes from the housing tracts and shopping strips of Frederick, has managed to remain. A zoning law requiring five acres of land to build – a requirement that may increase to 25 acres – has kept rapacious developers at bay.

With a sound of awe in her voice, 10-year-old Yasmin Tunador, who has joined our family for the trip, says, "You should tell people that if they like trees, they should come here, because there are a lot of trees." (6/23/02)

Discussions of this sort accounted for 11 percent of coverage of rural issues (13 percent for print, six percent for TV).

Also included in this category were stories about harmless eccentrics in rural areas. These often had a serious element, as eccentricity was usually exposed at the intersection of rural America and suburbia. This formula played out variously in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Post* and *New York Times* with different characters. In the Chicago area, it was an elderly man whose property was littered with 25 dumpsters worth of trash and furniture.

Four times authorities cleared the rusting refrigerators, dilapidated cars and rotting lumber from Sebastian Karsch's 3.2-acre St. Charles homestead. Four times he filled it back up.

This week crews carted away the 68-year-old man's pile of clutter for good, bringing an end to one of Kane County's longer-running legal battles by demolishing Karsch's home.

“He’s deeply saddened,” said Jim Wyer, Karsch’s attorney. “He’s in a state of shock that they actually went through with it.”

Karsch, a retired tool and die maker, first ran into trouble in 1988. Suburban sprawl began encroaching on his rural home, as new houses in the Red Gate subdivision began encircling his property. The county responded to complaints by issuing him citations for operating a junkyard in a residential area and violating health regulations.

The battle raged over the next 14 years, with Karsch fighting to keep his home and possessions and neighbors and public officials pushing to raze his house.

At one point, Karsch was jailed for not complying with judicial orders. (Chicago Tribune 3/28/02)

In the New York area, the *Times* trotted out the story of a woman in northern New Jersey who still had an outhouse - the last holdout in a string of vacation homes first built in the 1920s. The article was unusual in its allusions to the stereotype of feuding clans of hillbillies.

In some ways, this is story of a feud in the hills, something like one Hatfield versus several McCoys. It’s also a fable about the suburbanization of rural America. But mostly, it’s a story about an outhouse, a turquoise privy in the state’s northern reaches.

The town of West Milford has told Laura Hooper, who owns the outhouse, that she has until Feb. 27 to start installing indoor plumbing, including a flushing toilet.

In this sprawling town in Passaic County with tracts of sparsely populated wooded hills, many houses were built at the turn of the century and the decades following as summer homes, with no running water or electricity. Throughout the years occupants have modernized them. Kenneth Hawkswell, the town’s public health officer, said he didn’t know of any other former summer homes here without indoor plumbing, even though some of the owners kept the outhouses as nostalgic garden decor.

When Ms. Hooper moved to Henderson Road in the 1970’s, it was to a small house among a cluster of seven that her family had built in the 1920’s. Ms. Hooper, now 55, said that she intended to put in plumbing when she moved in, even buying a clawfoot tub, but that she just didn’t have the money. (New York Times 2/10/02)

In Washington, the functional equivalent of this story was that of a man who ran an unlicensed flea market for office furniture in a rapidly suburbanizing part of Northern Virginia. In each case, the influx of more suburban neighbors created a conflict that prompted some sort of action by the local government.

## Environment

This issue never really stood on its own, lacked detail, and was entirely confined to print sources (seven percent of print coverage of rural issues). The few specific discussions that came up concerned water pollution from farm chemicals or from intensive processes like hog and chicken farming. There was one study that even linked ecological problems in the oceans to agricultural runoff. The following *New York Times* article hit many of these notes:

By the time the Raccoon River winds through the western hills here, passing corn fields and livestock pens before reaching Des Moines miles to the east, it is so polluted the city has to put it through a special nutrient filter to meet government standards for drinking water.

The culprits are not industrial plants or mines belching toxins into the river. They are Iowa farms, which send fertilizer and animal wastes into the groundwater and into the river.

“Farmers are the problem,” said L. D. McMullen, the general manager of the Des Moines Water Works. “And they are entirely unregulated.”

The issue goes beyond Iowa. Across the country, metropolitan water agencies are battling increasing pollution from the countryside. The river pollution is spreading and helping to cause dead zones in the open seas. A recent study by the Pew Oceans Commission, an independent group examining government policies, called huge livestock feedlots and farm fertilizer runoff among the fastest-growing sources of pollution in oceans thousands of miles away.

As a result, the \$171 billion, 10-year farm bill, once seen as a parochial issue for rural lawmakers, has been scrutinized by members of Congress from urban and suburban districts who realize that the upheaval in agriculture has implications beyond the grocery store. (2/10/02)

## Health Care

Health care accounted for six percent of all rural issues (six percent of TV coverage and six percent of print coverage, a third of which appeared in the weekly news magazines). The cancellation of a visa program for foreign doctors was the most notable story among problems facing rural America at large. Through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), many rural communities recruited foreign doctors to serve in their communities through a visa waiver system. After 9/11, the USDA decided it could not police the program and canceled it. Several articles highlighted the negative impact this had in many rural areas, particularly

in relation to mental health care. One of the most important functions of the USDA program was that it supplied psychiatrists to rural areas that were unable to attract American doctors. This was one of the few “rural” stories picked up by both print and television, as can be seen in the following NBC story:

TOM BROKAW, anchor: NBC News IN DEPTH tonight. Security in the post-September 11th world. President Bush today signed a bill to tighten up border security and keep better track of people coming into this country. Included, 400 new immigration investigators and new technology, including tamper-resistant passports. But for many Americans in rural parts of America, there could be a serious downside to more harsh immigration policies, even if they are an important part of homeland security. IN DEPTH now, here's NBC's national correspondent, Jim Avila.

JIM AVILA reporting: In America's heartland, the face of the family doctor is often foreign.

Dr. NAGESH CHOPRA (Southeast Colorado Hospital): Gladys, how are you?

AVILA: Nagesh Chopra got his medical degree in India, served his residency in New Jersey, now agreeing to work in remote Springfield, Colorado, a town so far away from a major city, no American doctor will work here.

Dr. CHOPRA: Pay is good, people are nice, congenial environment, and you really are the king.

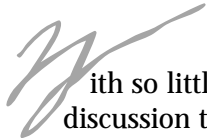
AVILA: Dr. Chopra's days as king could be numbered. He's one of three foreign doctors that keep Springfield's hospital open. But because of security concerns, the American government is suspending the visa program that supports so many rural US hospitals. Chopra's stay in jeopardy, despite his own clean record. He is here legally. But the Department of Agriculture, which helps supervise medical care in rural areas, says it is not equipped to do background checks and fears terrorists could infiltrate the program. More than 3,000 foreign doctors are using these special J-1 visas to serve rural America. The government concedes that most are doing good and necessary work. But the USDA claims that some are not where they're supposed to be or doing the work they were assigned to do. The USDA says a review ordered after September 11th found three of seven applications investigated were considered security risks. Only those applications already in the pipeline are now being reviewed, and no new ones will be accepted until the program is totally revamped. In the meantime, entire hospitals could close. Administrator Kay Stark advertised nationally for doctors, got 75 applications, not one from an American.

Ms. KAY STARK: They are very good doctors for us and have absolutely become part of the community, and we'd be devastated if they left.

AVILA: The National Rural Health Association says that could leave 215 counties across America without a single physician. Dana and Kelly Alley say that would be a disaster. They can watch their son play ball today because foreign doctors kept their community hospital open and kept Logan Alley alive after a terrible car accident. (5/14/02)

There were also several pieces dealing with possible hospital closings or recently completed closures. The obvious impact on health care availability was covered, which often left rural residents with many miles to drive for care. There were also a few stories dealing with loss of health insurance when plants in rural communities close.

## **Education**

 With so little coverage given to education (four percent overall, none on TV), the discussion touched briefly on a number of issues, including education achievement in rural areas and the general problem of accommodating growing school populations in developing rural communities. For example, in the following passage, the *New York Times* pointed out the impact of shrinking rural budgets:

Short \$240,000 in a \$1.4 million budget, the first thing the leaders of the Edgemont School District did was combine the middle school and high school, eliminating three teachers and a principal.

Next they dropped the gifted program, chopped the guidance counselor's hours in half, ended full-time kindergarten and recruited volunteers to coach track and wrestling.

Now, they are cutting Fridays.

"For us it's a matter of keeping the school open, having a community with a school that's worth going to," said Susan Humiston, a mother of four and president of Edgemont's five-member school board, which also gave up its \$50-per-meeting stipend. "I think we have cut as deep as we can cut and still have a school I'll send my kids to."

In the fall, this tiny district of 200 students here in the Black Hills, along with nearby Hot Springs, will join about 100 rural districts nationwide using a four-day school week, adding minutes to each class to make up some of the time. (6/9/02)

## Sources

We identified all the sources who were interviewed or quoted in coverage of rural issues to find out whose voices were being heard. The overall distribution of sources on television and print appears in Table 4. The differences among the various print outlets are shown in Table 5. The most striking finding was the discovery that television passes over the middle layer of civic life by favoring mainly voices from either ordinary people (31 percent) or national government sources (27 percent). This distribution of sources was highly influenced by television coverage of the Midwest mailbox bomber. These stories featured extensive quotes from FBI agents and U.S. postal workers, as well as rural victims and others from the affected communities. Traditional local leaders and “pillars of the community” like educators (3 percent) business sources (2 percent) and activists (1 percent) had little or no representation. Likewise city, county and state government got short shrift (7 percent) on the airwaves.

Table 4

<b>Rural News Sources (%)</b>			
	All	TV	Print
Citizens	16	31	13
State Government	9	4	10
US Government Congress (6)	14	27	12
City/County Government Police (3)	14	3	16
Business	10	2	11
Experts	6	3	6
Activists Environmental (3)	5	1	6
Health Workers	3	4	3
Educators	3	3	3
Other	21	22	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>101%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>N</b>	<b>1201</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>1015</b>

Note: Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding error

Table 5

<b>Sources - Print Outlets</b>						
	All	New York Times	Washington Post	Chicago Tribune	USA Today	Magazines
Citizens	13	18	9	16	6	17
State Government	10	8	12	9	8	0
US Government	12	16	9	13	12	1
Local Government	16	17	16	21	4	0
Business	11	11	13	11	12	0
Activists	6	8	7	4	9	0
Health	3	3	1	3	2	37
Educators	3	5	5	—	2	0
Experts	6	5	5	5	16	0
Other	20	9	24	18	29	43
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>101%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>98%</b>
<b>N</b>	<b>1015</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>328</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>30</b>

Note: Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding error

In contrast, ordinary citizens were significantly less likely to be used as sources in print outlets (13 percent overall), while local government sources trumped national government sources (26 to 12 percent). Except for business sources, many of whom were realtors (11 percent overall), print outlets did not have significantly more coverage of local groups, activists or experts than TV. The one exception here was *USA Today*, which had a far greater tendency to rely on experts for commentary on rural issues than any other outlet (16 percent versus a print average 6 percent). This paper also made the least use of local citizens of any outlet (6 percent). We also found that *The Washington Post* was no more likely than any other newspaper to feature the views of national office holders, despite its location in America's capital. It had the lowest proportion of national government sources of all the newspapers in our sample.

Cutting across these categories is the notable absence of individual or institutional sources addressing rural issues from the perspective of agricultural concerns. As Table 6 shows, a mere 31 sources, or 2.6 percent of total, were agriculture-related. The bulk of these statements came from individual experts; representatives of the Department of Agriculture reported only three times; and there were only six quotations from all farming and agricultural groups combined, e.g. American Farm Bureau and National Farm Action Campaign. As we shall see, the absence of such groups from the immediate dialogue reflects the relative rarity of agricultural frames or world issues.

Table 6

<b>Agriculture-Related Sources</b>	
Source Type	Number of Sources
Experts	22
Department of Agriculture	3
Farm/Agriculture Groups	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>
Percent of Sources	2.6%

## Appraisals of Change

Understanding the news coverage of rural America involves more than simply identifying its components, such as the newsworthy issues or the dominant source groups. News stories also offer opinions and conjecture on relevant policies or activities. These opinions help to shape the tone of coverage in ways both overt and subtle. For this study, we were interested in how sources or reporters in these stories saw change in rural America. Was change heralded as beneficial to rural communities? Did reporters and sources lament the loss of a rural life even while accepting its inevitability? Or did most flatly oppose change?

As Table 7 shows, opinions about changes to rural America were divided into three roughly equal camps. Thirty-five percent of comments favored change, while 27 percent saw change as regrettable but inevitable, and the remaining 38 percent opposed change altogether. A brief passage from a Chicago Tribune (1/27/02) article illustrates all three views:

Table 7

<b>Appraisals of Change (%)</b>					
	Support	Accept	Oppose	Total	N
Residents	25	33	42	100%	24
Officials	56	11	33	100%	9
Others	50	25	25	100%	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>37</b>

It will be harder to capture Yorkville's rural heritage when the farms around it sprout houses. But preserving open lands is important to Yorkville. People who live in the area have mixed views on all the changes.

Longtime resident Michelle Pfister has already experienced small-town Yorkville and welcomes the latest edition. "I think we just have to deal with and accept it and do the best we can to keep Yorkville a nice town," she said. [coded as accepting change]

Frank Farmer, who lives in neighboring Oswego and comes to Yorkville for senior citizen club activities, has a concern. "It's some of the greatest land in the world, and here we plant houses on it. I mean, it's gone forever," he said. [coded as opposing change]

Tammy Burdzinski and her family moved to Heartland from Bolingbrook in November. "We were very excited because Yorkville is much smaller," she said. "Yorkville has lots of areas for expansion, so it's probably growing in a positive way with planned communities." [coded as supporting change]

When broken out by the source of these evaluations, it appeared that the strongest voice for change in rural America came from political leaders rather than from ordinary local residents. Fifty percent of all government officials who expressed opinions (including village, city, county and state governments as well as gubernatorial and congressional sources) favored or supported change in rural areas.

For instance, at another point in the above story, a city administrator in Illinois explained, "The theme is, this is a small town that is in transition. We're preserving the small-town image, and I don't believe anything that is happening at this point is hampering that character. I think the developers want to capture that, too." (*Chicago Tribune* 1/27/02). A planning commissioner quoted in the same story was even more enthusiastic, "There is a segment that would like to keep it the way it was 30 years ago. There is nothing wrong with them, but they cling to the past and refuse to accept the reality that there is going to be growth. We need to try to make it happen the way we want it to, and it should be balanced," (*Chicago Tribune* 1/27/02).

By contrast, residents who were quoted were lukewarm at best toward change. Only one out of four (25 percent) approved of the changes being discussed, while one in three (33 percent) voiced acceptance without approval, and a plurality of 42 percent expressed opposition. Most common were residents who lamented the inexorability of change, as the following opinions from a different *Chicago Tribune* piece suggest: "I wish it wasn't happening. But the real world keeps turning. I would like for it to remain a nice, sleepy Hawfields community," or "There are a lot of people that don't want development. But the way we're sitting on the interstate, just like the rest of Alamance County, it's going to happen." (6/30/02) Environmental groups that were cited opposed change, as did half of all business sources.

The outlooks that were expressed on the future of rural America were no more sanguine. Although only ten sources expressed opinions, half of them saw the future in terms of decline and failure, four were mixed, seeing either uncertainty or both positive and negative prospects, and only one projected a bright or improved future for rural America. For instance, in response to state cuts in Medicaid reimbursements, the *Chicago Tribune* examined the plight of rural hospitals and found a bleak picture:

In the last decade, a number of rural hospitals in the area have closed. The remaining ones are 30 minutes to an hour's drive away on two-lane roads. "People think hospitals will always be there," said Barbara Dallas, senior director of rural hospital services for the Illinois Hospital Association.

"But hospitals are going to close. Services will be discontinued," she said. "And then it will be too late." (1/2/02)


As this example suggests, most of the partly or wholly negative views came from local officials, health care workers and environmental activists. Even the mixed evaluations came in the form of warnings of potential future problems and the need to face them now to insure a positive outcome. For example, a recent study of development in the Washington D.C. area painted an alarming picture that was intended as a wakeup call to local officials to act before it would be too late to avoid future problems.

Maryland Secretary of Planning Roy W. Kienitz has been traveling the state to warn county officials to act now to protect open space.

He has found varying degrees of awareness and concern about the problem, with older urban counties such as Prince George's and Montgomery refining their long-term policies and goals, while more-suburban and rural counties such as Howard, Frederick, Anne Arundel and the jurisdictions in Southern Maryland are still debating to what extent they should steer growth.

"Those suburban counties, in particular, really need to take ownership of the fact that there are parts of their communities that are going to get ruined unless people do something proactive now," Kienitz said. (5/1/02)

## Frames

 news story is more than the sum of its parts. In addition to informing readers or viewers about the facts it contains, stories organize the information in a manner that creates a framework for interpretation. Opinions, issue discussions and the use of descriptive language can all contribute to this framing process. In short, framing involves the process of putting information into a logical order or context. Some stories are more conducive to framing than others, as are the approaches of different news organizations. For example, we would expect to find less frequent contextualizing in a summary of events read by a network anchor than in a story that is labeled a “news analysis” in the *New York Times*.

Based on the *Perceptions of Rural America* research, as well as our preliminary review of the news, we examined all stories for the presence of three frames – an agricultural or farming context, the notion of rural life as backward or empty, and a more positive view of the rural landscape as a quaint or charming place. The substance and frequency of these frames are discussed below. In addition, we compared the propensity for framing at the various outlets by aggregating all instances in which any of the three frames was coded.

The first of these three frames in our analysis was a frame that linked “rural” with agriculture and a farmstead lifestyle. To identify this frame, we combined two distinct measures. Discussions of the 2002 farm bill, loss of family farms, and farm-based employment as issues were combined with the use of descriptive terms like “agricultural” and “farming” to describe rural places.

The second frame captured portrayals of rural areas as filled with stereotypical rednecks or an impoverished or backwards lifestyle. Markers for this frame included discussions of domestic violence and unusual crimes, which were often reported in a way that suggested the offender was intellectually challenged as well. Such issue discussions were combined with comments about poor living conditions in rural areas and the use of language describing residents of rural areas or people as rednecks, hillbillies, or bumpkins and their living conditions as hardscrabble or poor.

The final frame we looked for were indications that rural America is a kind of “Lake Wobegon” paradise. This frame was the hardest to pin down, as it is evocative of a rather abstract notion. The whimsical creation of radio personality and humorist Garrison Keillor, Lake Wobegon is a fictional place that is quiet and peaceful, with a touch of charming eccentricity, and where “all the children are above average.” In our analysis we looked for issue discussions of local eccentrics (who were neither criminal nor dangerous) and discussions of rural areas as a retreat from urban life. To these discussions we added the use of descriptive terms like “pastoral,” “peaceful,” “picturesque,” “quiet,” “sleepy,” “quaint,” “Currier & Ives” and “Norman Rockwell.”

The results of this procedure appear in Table 8, which shows a total frequency of 112 frames, a rate of once every three stories or .33 per story. But there were substantial differences between the two media genres; frames appeared almost four times as often in print as in television stories, by .39 to .10 per story. The most thematic format was that of the news magazines, which averaged .78 frames per story. The length of the stories, as well as their orientation toward summaries and overviews, contributed to the heavy presence of framing in them.

Among the newspapers, however, there were sharp differences. *The New York Times* was almost as heavily thematic as the news magazines, averaging .67, or two frames for every three stories. This rate was three times as heavy as we found at the *Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune* (.21 apiece), the other two major metropolitan dailies. *USA Today* placed between these two poles at .36 frames per story, reflecting the more thematic perspective of this purely national newspaper. Among the television networks, we found no instances of any frames at either CBS or NBC. By contrast, ABC averaged a little better than one frame in every four stories (.27).

Agricultural frames appeared almost as frequently as did the backwards and Lake Wobegone themes combined. However, the relative propensity toward framing was consistent across the three frames that we examined. That is, outlets that were high or low in the presence of one frame tended to finish in the same relative position for the others. This consistency across categories increases our confidence in the stability of the finding of outlet differences in overall tendencies toward narratives that employ framing.

Table 8

<b>Combined Number of Frames</b>		
News Organization	Number	Frames Per Story
ABC	6	.27
CBS	0	.00
NBC	0	.00
<i>Subtotal TV</i>	<i>(6)</i>	<i>(.10)</i>
New York Times	57	.67
Washington Post	17	.21
Chicago Tribune	16	.21
USA Today	9	.36
News Magazines	7	.78
<i>Subtotal Print</i>	<i>(106)</i>	<i>(.39)</i>
Total	112	.33

## Agricultural Frame

The incidence of agricultural frames is shown in Table 9. Overall, only one story out of six (16 percent) linked rural life with farming or agriculture. As in other areas of coverage, there were significant differences across outlets in the amount of discussion. The *New York Times* was the only news outlet to employ the farming frame with any frequency, appearing in 32 percent of its stories. Otherwise, the idea that rural America is synonymous with farming was not borne out in our sample of stories. *USA Today* (18 percent), *The Washington Post* (12 percent) and *The Chicago Tribune* (12 percent) all invoked such a frame to a lesser degree. Although a farming frame appeared in 44 percent of news magazine stories, the number of stories was so small as to make this finding insignificant. However, this linkage was made almost entirely in print outlets. The connection appeared in only two percent of television news stories.

Table 9

<b>Agricultural Frame</b>				
News Organization	Present	Absent	Total	Frames Per Story
ABC	1	21	22	.05
CBS	0	22	22	.00
NBC	0	18	18	.00
<i>Subtotal TV</i>	<i>(1)</i>	<i>(61)</i>	<i>(62)</i>	<i>(.01)</i>
New York Times	27	58	85	.32
Washington Post	10	70	80	.12
USA Today	5	20	25	.20
Chicago Tribune	6	70	76	.08
News Magazines	4	5	9	.44
<i>Subtotal Print</i>	<i>(52)</i>	<i>(223)</i>	<i>(275)</i>	<i>(.19)</i>
Total Stories	53	284	337	.16

The following *New York Times* story is typical of this genre. It also suggests that the use a farming frame would have been even less frequent but for discussions of the farm bill being debated in Congress at the time. Across all outlets the largest contributor to this frame were the economic and political discussions of the farm bill and its impact. The political debate surrounding the farm bill was particularly important in this regard.

From a distance, the rice capital of America resembles a small metropolis; its grain elevators and processing mills rise from the delta plains like so many skyscrapers plunked in the middle of unending rice fields.

Up close, however, this town of 10,420 people gives an entirely different impression.

Smack up against two of the United States' biggest rice processing businesses lie neighborhoods of rundown houses and shanties. In the surrounding countryside, decaying towns like Altheimer offer evidence that the area's smaller rice farmers are going out of business at one of the fastest rates in the country.

This region, whose farmers have helped make the United States the world's third-largest rice exporter behind Thailand and Vietnam, offers one of the starkest examples of the unintended consequences of the federal farm subsidy program.

But the subsidies have been lopsided. The top 1 percent of farmers and farm groups in the federally defined Mississippi Delta region receive 26 percent of the subsidies, or \$1.9 billion. The bottom 80 percent receive only 9 percent, or \$686 million, says the Environmental Working Group, which amassed the data through a Freedom of Information request. The group used its Web site, [www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org), to make public every federal subsidy paid to every farmer from 1996 to 2000.

"This is what happens when a town loses its middle class," said John D. Crow, who operates a bed and breakfast in Helena.

Senator Blanche Lincoln, who comes from this area, argued in a recent speech that federal farm policy was harming rural America.

"It is not only our farmers who are suffering as a result of failed government policy," Ms. Lincoln said. "The institutions of small-town and rural America – local banks and merchants, feed and supply stores, equipment dealers, even corner groceries and family-owned hardware stores – are all caught in the web of financial collapse."

Perhaps most striking is the pace of consolidation of big farms – what a state official referred to as the "plantation effect."

Because large farmers receive the largest subsidies, they are buying out smaller farmers, leading to what the Agriculture Department calls a "rapid decline" of family farms under 100 acres and the rise of old-fashioned tenant farming. Over three-fourths of rice farms are worked by tenants or part-owners, the department says. (1/22/02)

Very few stories characterized rural places in such detail as "farming" or "agricultural" communities. This is most likely reflective of the "ex-urban" focus of many stories. While many of the stories in this sample mentioned how ex-urban counties were trying to preserve their "rural" feel or heritage, they rarely mentioned what that heritage was. It was left to the reader to fill in the blanks with their own perceptions of rural America.

## Backwards Frame

Though we came across a number of stories that looked at rural poverty, poor housing stock and the difficulties of rural life, they did not generally portray people as backwards, rednecks or yokels. Instead rural folk were presented as hard-working people trying to get by in places with few jobs and low incomes. Insofar as the “backwards” theme was present, it tended to reflect descriptions of the effects of low income rather than negative judgements of residents. This frame was found most prominently in the *New York Times* (.20 per story) and *USA Today* (.14). It was found in 11 percent of the handful of news magazine articles, and eight percent of *Chicago Tribune* and television stories dealt with this frame. Finally, the *Washington Post* was the least likely (only one percent of stories) to present rural areas in this context.

The following excerpt from a *New York Times* article shows how even a story on illegal drug use could adopt a relatively non-judgmental tone by focusing on underlying economic conditions.

As bad as the drug problem is here, “It is pretty typical for all of rural Mississippi,” said Charlie Brown Jr., the assistant special agent in charge of Mississippi for the Drug Enforcement Administration.

“You’ve got counties where there are no jobs and the income is below poverty level, so you have groups trafficking in drugs who take advantage of that, and you have local sheriffs and small-town police chiefs who have very limited resources,” Mr. Brown said. “Everybody in the community knows who is dealing, but because of their limited manpower, there is very little law enforcement can do.”

Experts in rural crime agree that the reasons Mr. Brown cited are some of the basic causes of the growth in rural drug use and crime.

“You have many rural areas that are persistent poverty areas, in essence rural ghettos,” said Joseph Donnermeyer, professor of rural sociology at Ohio State University. “They were once isolated and were protected by that, with lower crime, but now better communications have broken down that buffer so they begin to resemble poor neighborhoods of big cities, where people are segregated by poverty.” (2/11/02) [Italics added for emphasis]

The following excerpt from the *USA Today* raised the “backwards” stereotype only to reject it and, in the end, leave the reader with an ambiguous impression of the lives of rural folk in Montana.

Five days a week from 8 to 11 a.m., John Stokes does his best to live up to his surname.

Whether it's railing against environmentalists as "Green Nazis," taunting his critics as "nitwits" or hosting a promotion that features listeners shooting up the United Nations flag, the radio talk-show host in this northwest Montana community has stoked the fires of controversy.

Now, with the arrest of one of his occasional callers for allegedly stockpiling an arsenal of weaponry and plotting the assassination of local policemen and public officials, Stokes is being accused of helping foster an atmosphere conducive to threats and violence.

To some in the outside world, news of the arrest and outlandish alleged conspiracy here has renewed the stereotype of Montana as an incubator for weird zealots and anti-government movements. "Citizens back East either think we're burning up or being invaded," says Flathead County Sheriff Jim Dupont, recalling the state's notoriety for producing wildfires and extremists such as Unabomber Ted Kaczynski – captured in a cabin in Lincoln – and the Freemen – a group that rejected government authority and engaged in a nearly three-month standoff with the FBI.

Stokes, 50, and his main antagonist, Montana Human Rights Network executive director Ken Toole, rarely agree on anything. But they do see eye to eye on whether Montana is being unfairly tarred as a haven for political nuts.

Montana, Stokes says, "is being smeared."

Table 10

<b>Backwards Frame</b>				
News Organization	Frame Present	Frame Absent	Total	Frames per Story
ABC	5	17	22	.23
CBS	0	22	22	.00
NBC	0	18	18	.00
<i>Subtotal TV</i>	<b>(5)</b>	<b>(57)</b>	<b>(62)</b>	<b>(.08)</b>
New York Times	17	68	85	.20
Washington Post	1	79	80	.01
USA Today	3	22	25	.14
Chicago Tribune	6	70	76	.08
News Magazines	1	8	9	.11
<i>Subtotal Print</i>	<b>(28)</b>	<b>(247)</b>	<b>(275)</b>	<b>(.10)</b>
<b>Total Stories</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>304</b>	<b>337</b>	<b>.10</b>

“We have had the misfortune of having some of the more high-profile cases,” concedes Toole, whose group monitors right-wing activity. But he argues that other states with a similar level of militia-type activity don’t attract as much media attention because they have no organized monitoring groups such as his own. “The irony is, part of the reason we have a reputation for it is we have very aggressive groups that respond,” says Toole, a Democratic state senator from Helena. (4/8/02)

For its part, the *Washington Post* took on stereotypes of West Virginia in its coverage of another ex-urban real estate market.

Another reason West Virginia is less expensive, Ryan said, is the state’s image.

“It’s cheap because it’s West Virginia and there’s a stigma to West Virginia, although it’s a wonderful place to live,” Ryan said. “There are some people who just don’t want to live in West Virginia.”

The stereotype that the entire state is poor and backward is deeply held, buyers said.

“Oh, you’re going to go live with the hillbillies, people have said to us,” Mary Lewellyn said. And like others who have moved there, she admitted that she never thought she would live in West Virginia. (4/13/02)

## **Lake Wobegon Frame**

Most stories in our sample also failed to frame rural America as an engagingly eccentric, carefree retreat from the travails of modern life. While some of the stories that dealt with eccentrics come close to fitting the “Lake Wobegon” theme, many of the characterizations (pastoral, peaceful, picturesque, sleepy, quaint, Currier & Ives, Norman Rockwell) were more typically applied to ex-urban areas. In other words, the Lake Wobegon theme was reflected mostly in the language of realtors trying to depict great places to live on the outskirts of various metro areas. These were places that had charm or were quaint not because they were genuinely rural but because they had not yet been fully suburbanized. As we have already seen in other contexts, images of quaintness and charm were usually counterposed against the prospects or consequences of development, which threatened traditional values and lifestyles. This excerpt from the *New York Times* is typical of such discussions:

Development is accelerating along the Interstate 84 corridor in the semirural towns of Southbury and Middlebury. Land that is priced lower than in the more-expensive Fairfield County next door, including 1,500 acres of excess holdings for sale by I.B.M., has been attracting businesses; home builders are submitting proposals for subdivisions to accommodate expected population growth; and home buyers thirsting for small-town life away from expensive suburbs are willing to make longer commutes to work.

“Over the next few years we’ll see a lot more development in the ‘burbs,’ “ said Joanne Carroll, president of the Fairfield County Home Builders Association, referring to Danbury in Fairfield County, Southbury and Middlebury in New Haven County and Roxbury and Woodbury in Litchfield County. “The region has that remoteness that all of a sudden people are looking for,” she said, “and the demand for high-end homes is bringing in developers from the Farmington Valley to Westchester.”

Southbury and Middlebury, straddling I-84 at exits 14 and 16, are not exactly overjoyed at being invaded. “This is a little Currier & Ives community of 6,100 people living in 18 square miles,” said Middlebury’s first selectman, Edward St. John. “We feel very strongly about controlling growth. Nothing much has changed since we were incorporated in 1807.” (1/6/02)

As Table 11 indicates, the *New York Times* once again led the way, using this frame in 15 percent of its stories. The *Washington Post* came in second at 7 percent, followed by the *Chicago Tribune* (5%) and *USA Today* (4%). This frame was entirely absent from television stories. The following article in the *Washington Post* presented both the positive and negative sides of the wide open spaces in rural America and the lifestyles associated with them. It also illustrates the irony that it is often the very new newcomers who are suburbanizing rural areas who challenge traditional practices as inconsistent with their vision of what rural life is supposed to be like.

Jean Hinegardner’s farmhouse in Fauquier County is surrounded by things that make him happy. A black Labrador named Buddy wags and barks at visitors. The sun sets over fields of corn stubble, where black birds swoop down and alight in enormous flocks.

And then, there’s a different view: the Corel swivel chair by the rocky driveway, the turquoise Island bicycle with pink pedals by the front porch, the orange metal cabinets from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration on the front lawn and the broken-down Ford Bronco with a four-piece McDonald’s chicken nugget container wedged into the left windshield wiper.

Like many who grow up in rural areas, Hinegardner, 72, has no qualms about leaving his stuff out in the open. It sustains him and keeps him busy.

Table 11

<b>Lake Wobegon Frame</b>				
News Organization	Present	Absent	Total	Frames Per Story
ABC	0	22	22	.00
CBS	0	22	22	.00
NBC	0	18	18	.00
<i>Subtotal TV</i>	<i>(0)</i>	<i>(62)</i>	<i>(62)</i>	<i>(.00)</i>
New York Times	13	72	85	.15
Washington Post	6	74	80	.07
USA Today	1	24	25	.04
Chicago Tribune	4	72	76	.05
News Magazines	2	7	9	.22
<i>Subtotal Print</i>	<i>(26)</i>	<i>(249)</i>	<i>(275)</i>	<i>(.09)</i>
Total Stores	26	311	337	.08

Besides, says Hinegardner, who walks around with his Chihuahua, Happy, perched atop his shoulders, it's his property.

But Hinegardner and others around him are more and more often the target of complaints about the mess that surrounds them. As the Washington region's least populated county faces increasing growth, the rural live-and-let-live mentality is struggling to hold up against encroaching newcomer expectations. Those who live in the country precisely because of its freedoms are increasingly clashing with suburbanites used to homeowner associations governing their every move, or longtime residents vowing to preserve the country's looks.

Tom Moran moved to his Bealeton subdivision four years ago from Prince William County and has been sparring with his neighbor, John Paul Thompson, ever since. When Thompson built a \$65,000 automobile garage with a forklift for his towing and restoration business, Moran and other neighbors complained about the noise and possible air pollution.

“It wasn’t the element that we were looking for or expected when we moved out to the country. We came here for the openness and the cleanliness,” Moran said.

Bill and Shelby Earnshaw, who moved six years ago from Prince William, store scrap metal in their back yard. He hauls some of it to a nearby recycling center. But their neighbor Barbara Correia, a 30-year resident, started complaining. The county filed an injunction last year, alleging that the Earnshaws were operating a junkyard, and they promptly cleaned it up.

The Earnshaws said they cannot afford to haul everything off. But Correia said she believes that the Earnshaws are still in violation and worries that the metal might contaminate the soil and water.

I love country living, and I think people have a right to do to their property what they want, but their mess is affecting our property values. It’s unsightly,” Correia said. I think our county is slowly trying to move into the future, and people realize we’re no longer agricultural. The county should be more vigilant about what goes on in a residential area than how they’ve been in the past.” (2/25/02)

## Conclusion

Our study found that the term “rural” is often used in the media to describe areas that are becoming urbanized and are trying to preserve their rural past or atmosphere. Thus, we found extensive coverage of exurban counties like Loudon and Fauquier counties in Virginia; St. Mary’s, Calvert and Howard counties in Maryland; and similar rings of counties on the outskirts of Chicago and New York. This *Washington Post* story was typical:

Stepping into the hottest issue to emerge from recent zoning hearings, the St. Mary’s County Chamber of Commerce has urged county government to keep a proposed zoning ordinance’s provisions allowing one new home per five acres in rural areas.

That standard for so-called rural preservation districts was criticized by planning officials and environmental groups at last month’s hearings. They say the county should require 15 to 20 acres per dwelling unit in those districts to preserve the rural character of open spaces. (3/14/02)

In short, “rural” is a term often used in news stories to describe an exurban battleground, where planned or recently built new homes or businesses have begun to collide with existing farms and rural institutions that are unprepared for such development. Even stories that covered more traditional uses of rural land such as farming, pointed out the balancing act necessary to deal with encroaching nearby suburbs:

First Ghassan Neshawat bought the basic equipment – the tractor, plow, disc, blade and bush hog. Then there was nearly \$ 2,000 for seeds, heating pads and grow lights, \$ 5,000 more for the irrigation system and \$ 1,000 for fencing. In all, Neshawat has invested close to \$ 30,000 in his 17-acre farm, named after his daughter, Jasmine, in the last year.

But the former medical sonographer has made only \$ 3,100. Yet he is determined to be a farmer and not be discouraged.

“I love the land. This is where my heart is,” said Neshawat, 41.

With new housing developments cropping up everywhere, Howard County is seeking to preserve as much rural land as possible. With developers willing to pay more than \$ 14,000 an acre for prime land, however, it’s no mystery why many farmers are calling it quits and newcomers, such as Neshawat, are rare. (Washington Post 3/14/02)

This goes a long way towards explaining the heavy newspaper focus on land use/zoning issues. Especially in Chicago and Washington, much of the coverage revolved around outlying metro counties moving to set up rural preserves and open spaces to prevent suburban sprawl. “Rural” was frequently used as a kind of boutique term to conjure up an idyllic vision, rather than as a mark of real places that have a rural lifestyle or derive their income from rural activities. For example, in the following *New York Times* piece “rural” became a real estate marketing term:

In many parts of Pound Ridge, the rugged landscape seems to have been only gently altered by humans since the glaciers receded. In contrast to some of its neighbors, the town, Westchester’s smallest in area, has marked its topography over the years not with highways and malls but rather with stone walls and narrow country roads that wind past meandering brooks, stone outcroppings and densely wooded hills.

Nowhere in the town’s 23 square miles is there even a traffic light. Its population grew in the 90’s by a mere 4 percent, to 4,726 – “an increase of just 176 souls,” the Town Board Newsletter reported recently.

Tucked next to the Connecticut border in Westchester County's northeast section, "the community has always been a haven for people who want a rural way of life," said Ebie Wood, the manager of Houlihan/Lawrence's Pound Ridge office.

But that way of life, along with the open spaces that draw new homeowners to Pound Ridge, comes at a price. The median price of a single-family home last year was \$695,000 – far above the countywide median of \$449,000 in 2001. The asking price for the least expensive home currently on the market is \$349,000, but that will buy only a 1,000-square-foot cottage with one bedroom on a half acre lot. In contrast, there is a 7,800-square-foot contemporary with six bedrooms and seven and a half baths on 6.5 acres, listed at \$3.75 million. Pound Ridge has no condominiums or co-ops, and there are but a handful of apartments in town. Some of them are accessory apartments in private homes, and others are above stores. (3/10/02)

Thus, "rural" was often defined negatively, either in terms of what it is not or what it may become. But by using "rural" as a foil for "urban", the media frequently hollowed out whatever substantive meaning might be attached to rural conditions or lifestyles. For example, rural life was relatively rarely associated with agriculture. Fewer than three percent of all sources who were cited had any connection to agriculture. Agriculture-related groups and their representatives were quoted only six times, far less than others, such as environmental groups. And only one out of six stories was framed in terms of agriculture or farming, even though we used a liberal definition of framing that did not require farming to be a major theme of the story.

The associations of rural life on television were negative in another sense. The term "rural" was notable for its absence; on the rare occasions in which it appeared, it was frequently used in connection with records of criminal activity. A remarkable 78 percent of discussions of rural life on television news dealt with crime. Much of this coverage reflected television coverage of the single criminal case, the bombings of mailboxes and will rural parts of the Midwest. Were it not for the case of the mailbox bomber, television would have only rarely connected the term "rural" to any activity at all.

In light of this overall picture, it was not surprising find that rural life and related issues were rarely contextualized, either positively or negatively, in terms of the associations and connotations that they frequently carry. Only one out of 10 stories was framed in terms that presented rural America as an economically challenged place, or one populated by socially marginal or backward residents. But these negative stereotypes were balanced even less frequently – in one out of every 12 stories – by frames and encouraged readers to picture rural life as the kind of quaint and charming place conjured up by Currier and Ives prints or Garrison Keillor's stories about the fictional residents of Lake Wobegone.

Thus, for all the frequently voiced concerns that we encountered about the changes facing rural areas or their future prospects, the world of “rural” America was often presented by the media as a vestige of our past, a place being buffeted by its close encounters with the physical and cultural mainstream of contemporary urban society. It was not associated with agriculture so much as open space and the real or imagined qualities of small town living.

The term “rural” was rarely used on television news except in connection with crime; this likely reflects television’s growing preoccupation with crime and violence more than any interest in the newsworthiness of rural life per se. The portrait that appeared in newspapers and magazines possessed considerably more breadth and depth. But even print news stories tended to be episodic in nature, failing to contextualize the events they recount in terms of qualities associated with rural life. As portrayed in the media, rural America is a nice place to visit, but you wouldn’t learn enough to decide whether you wanted to live there.





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