



'Rural Lines of Flight: Telecommunications and Post-Metro Dreaming' ¹

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Transformations, No. 2 (March 2002)

<http://www.cqu.edu.au/transformations>

ISSN 1444-377

Abstract: Information and communications technologies hold a prominent place in the cultural imagination of many people living outside the Australian metropolis, especially recent émigrés. A vision of a wired pastoral conjures up the possibilities of city work, connections and pleasures accompanying the flight to the country. Such aspirations have given a twist to one of the great *topos* of Australian post-invasion communications history, communications ameliorating the perceived isolation in the bush. This article examines important changes to rural telecommunications in the 1990s coinciding with post-metro dreaming and digital convergence, namely the rise of local telecommunications. Neo-Foucauldian accounts of citizenship hold some promise for explaining the criss-cross of tangled lines of flight in regional communications in the twenty-first century: emergent subjectivities, utopian digital modes of becoming, new politics of infrastructure, reconfigured relationships among state, market and citizen.

Key terms: telecommunications, rural, citizenship, competition, new media, convergence.

Wired Pastoral

Fugitive Australians are resettling in areas outside major metropolises, transforming intentional communities, becoming more literally-minded outside the cities and conurbations, returning to the bush. Keener spirits take up farming or aspire to be displaced yuppies in possession of what rural real estate agents dub a 'lifestyle property'. In my own case, in 1996 I moved to the Far North Coast of New South Wales (a region also known as the Northern Rivers). This area is experiencing high levels of immigration, due to an influx into the coastal areas (Yamba, Iluka, Ballina, Byron Bay, Brunswick Heads, the Tweed Coast), but also people keen to reside in the network of villages in the hinterland half an hour to an hour's commuting to the coast (Dunoon, Federal, Eureka, Mullumimby, Myocum). The district also comprises farming communities which hosted new arrivals with alternative visions and experimental social structures from the 1960s onwards (Nimbin, Terania Creek, Uki) as well as regional centres (Casino, Grafton, Kyogle, Lismore, Murwillimbah). Thus the movement to desirable areas of the region provides countervailing economic benefits to declining areas and sectors. In my case I settled with my then partner in Rosebank, a small rural community, which in my mind occupied an imaginary as well as geographical location between Lismore (work) and Byron Bay (play). My transition

was eased by ritual watching of the ABC series *SeaChange*, reinforcing in a light comic vein the cultural sustainability of my ex-centric lifestyle.

The discourse on these migratory developments is a many-stranded thing, but one strong thread of it is an emphasis on the 'Rainbow Region' (see Baden Offord's 'Mapping the Rainbow Region' in this issue). This trope encompasses an envisioning of the creative diversity of the areas indigenous, colonial, post-federation, and post-Aquarius cultures. It also indicates how the advantages of an urban culture can be recreated in a beautiful, decentralised area, realised by the potential of intellectuals, artists, musicians, ferals, activists, postmodern pastoralists, farmers fired up with enthusiasm for new trade opportunities afforded by liberalisation of world trade intersecting with niche crops, and business people, among others. Boosters for the Northern Rivers, an apocryphal organisation of whom I am a seriously signed-up member, like nothing more than to 'wax lyrical' about the possibilities for new ways of overcoming the various alienations of wage-slavery in Australian cities, extolling the virtues of working from home, shuttling among the various settled nodes of the area to transact business, redressing poverty and economic restructuring away from unviable agricultural industries such as farming, travelling as emissaries and envoys to centres of urban capital and power (Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra) as required, absorbing, inaugurating and circulating ideas around the world, and most importantly for the purpose of this article, using new information and communications technologies to reconfigure the relationship between the local and the global, the regional and the national.²

At the beginning of the twenty-first century it is this vision of a *wired pastoral* which speaks to a tangle of desires of the traveller leaving behind the dystopian city. New spaces in rural regions are being conjured in opposition to the histories and futures of the modern and postmodern city, and the wired pastoral connects metaphorically and literally with these novel lines of flight created from this conjuncture. The wired pastoral gives a twist to one of the great *topoi* of Australian communications history, communications as a way to overcome the isolation of the bush, as signalled in the title of Ann Moyal's history of Australian telecommunications, *Clear Across Australia* (Moyal 1984).³ Unfortunately, as union official Kevin Morgan once pointed out in debate at a 1991 Consumers' Telecommunications Network conference, Australia is not blessed with 'world's best practice in geography'. For much of the twentieth-century, the provision of telecommunications to rural areas was the centrepiece of a nation-building project, building on colonial foundations such as the telegraphy of the nineteenth-century (Goggin 2000; Harcourt 1987; Moyal 1984). This culminated in the then Telecom's Rural and Remote Areas Program, which resulted in the automation of every exchange in Australia by 1992.

With the liberalisation of telecommunications markets from the late 1980s onwards, and the privatisation of national carrier Telstra, access of rural citizens to the apparently decisive modernising of Australian communications (O'Regan 2000) has been of great concern, and local communities in rural areas have long been dissatisfied with their lesser access to telecommunications. Debates surrounding the restructuring of Australian telecommunications in the past two decades have been preoccupied with registering and solving problems for rural communities, non-indigenous and indigenous (although the latter have not featured very prominently at all in debates; though the first major study into indigenous communications for many years was announced in 2001, see Alston 2001b; also Productivity Commission 2000).

For rural and remote residents in the 1990s maintenance and improvement of access, service quality, the benefits of competition, the use of new technologies

enjoyed by city counterparts, and many other issues, became features of national policy debates. In the twentieth-first century, non-metropolitan communities also view advanced telecommunications (mobile, fixed, and satellite), internet and new media infrastructures as all important to the economic, cultural and social sustainability of traditional and new scenes of rural life. Despite landmark reforms in telecommunications, as symbolised by the 1991 and 1997 *Telecommunications Acts*, private telecommunications companies have been slow to meet the needs and expectations of country-dwellers, with the prospects well-expressed by Ros Easson's gloomy prognosis:

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that global telecommunications markets will deal harshly with Australia in the next decade, or at least with the communications needs of those Australians living outside the major metropolitan areas. In the absence of mechanisms which ensure sustained and systematic investment in rural and regional communications infrastructure, inequities in the quality and availability of services must multiply (Eason, 2000: 101-102; see also AIEAC 1999; STS 1996).

Yet there has been a new development in rural telecommunications in Australia, which is significant and has coincided with the new arrivals and their visions splendid of wired pastoral - local telecommunications. Local telecommunications has become something of a preoccupation of local communities and regional government, especially in the wake of changing national policy approaches to universal service and infrastructure provision.

Local Telecommunications

For constitutional and political reasons, telecommunications has been a national affair in Australia for much of this century. Telecommunications has been delivered by national-based organisations (mainly by the Postmaster General's Department, and its postal and telecommunications successors, as well as the Overseas Telecommunications Commission before its amalgamation with Telecom). There have always been local telecommunications initiatives, especially in rural areas where property owners have at different stages individually or collectively provided part of the telecommunications infrastructure (lines, trenches, and so on), but these have tended to be uncoordinated and not systematically integrated into the system of national provision. This is quite different from how telecommunications has been organised in the leading Western country, the USA, which has had much commercial, regulatory, and legal activity at the state level, and has also featured regional telephone companies serving rural areas, which has always been a feature of the history of universal service in that country (Mueller 1997; Noam & Wolfson 1997; Wilson 2000).

In this sense, the national character of telecommunications has significantly changed in Australia since 1997. Local communities in rural areas have long been dissatisfied with their lesser access to telecommunications, complaining that they receive new services later than their metropolitan counterparts, pay higher prices, and endure lower quality of service (AUSTEL 1992; CTN 1994; Campbell 2000). In my residence only twenty kilometres away from Lismore, a medium-sized rural centre, I do not have free-to-air television, have no mobile phone coverage, and have coped over the past few years with poor quality and slow internet access via the public telecommunications network. Broadband technologies already available in cities, such as cable modem and digital subscriber line, are likely not to be available in my community for a very long time, if at all, and satellite, wireless and mobile

telecommunications will remain costly and inadequate for some time to come. From the liberal free market perspective dominating Australian telecommunications policymaking, but particularly the policies of the Liberal-National Party governments in power from 1996, legislative and regulatory changes to allow local communities to purchase or establish their own telecommunications services have appeared an attractive option. Not only does this provide communities with 'choice', and seek to confer power on the 'grassroots' and away from centralised state entities, it also promises to relieve government from funding or regulating telecommunications provision for country areas.

One of the pervasive myths of discussions of local telecommunications, consonant with discourses of liberalisation of telecommunications markets, is that 'micro'-carriers would emerge (IPAC 1997) - what Federal Communications Minister Richard Alston calls, in American cadence, 'Mom and Pop telcos'. What was desired here was a greater congruence between community need, articulated by the collectivity, and the commercial providers' services, in a community telecommunications provider, whether formed by or contracted with by the community (or a significant section of it). Accordingly, while continuing to lobby government for better service (through their National Party representatives, for instance), communities are taking matters into their own hands, advantaging themselves of the latitude allowed by the 1997 *Telecommunications Act* and the exhortations of parliamentary representatives. They are formulating telecommunications strategies for their region, assessing demand, making a business case, seeking interest from telecommunications providers, and generally looking for good communications solutions for their communities.

A spur to this activity has been an odd bit of ad hoc policy making, spawned from the Telstra partial privatisation: the Rural Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund (RTIF), known as the *Networking the Nation* fund (described in RTIF 1998; <http://www.dcita.gov.au/ntn>). Established in 1997 for five years, the Fund was entrusted with \$250 million to disburse as part of the government's 'broader policy strategy to ensure that areas outside of capital cities participate in and benefit from the employment and economic opportunities that flow on from access to new telecommunications services ... The purpose of the program is to fund projects which will assist the economic and social development of regional projects' (RTIF 1998: 11). Activities, projects to be funded, and the level of funding are decided by a five-member independent board, with support provided by a secretariat with the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA).

In June 1999, the *Networking the Nation* was supplemented by additional initiatives overseen by its board, such as the \$70 million Building Additional Rural Networks program, aiming at accelerating the development of high-speed regional communications networks; Local Government Fund (\$45m); Internet access (at least equivalent to untimed local call access) for regional and rural Australia (\$36m); meeting the telecommunications needs of remote and isolated island communities (\$20m); continuous mobile phone coverage on key major national highways (\$25m); additional mobile phone coverage in South Australia, Tasmania, and Western Australia (\$3m); and betters networks for Tasmanian Schools (\$15m). Projects funded in a range of rural areas have included: development of business cases to attract enhanced telecommunications; increased mobile phone coverage; telecentres and public internet access centres; awareness raising and training programs; regional electronic commerce and online portals; telemedicine network; women's justice network; High Frequency radiocommunications system for remote Aboriginal communities; development of authentication, privacy, and security guidelines; equipment upgrades for community access and resource centres; implementation of

local government entry points on the internet; open internet access program for people with disabilities; and broadband and high-speed communications network development.

One example of how this opening for local telecommunications was taken up may be found in my local area of Northern Rivers. Here an organisation called Norlink Limited was established to drive the process of creating an information economy in the Northern Rivers region of NSW (<http://www.norlink.net.au/>). Norlink represents the interests of eight peak bodies from local government and the economic, social and technology sectors across the region.⁴ In 1998 Norlink received funding from *Networking the Nation* to investigate telecommunications needs in the Northern Rivers and consult with the community - under the rubric of a project called *Networking the Northern Rivers*. At this stage they also conducted training and awareness activities, including television advertising. A second stage then evolved, with the aim of actively encouraging and promoting the use of internet and information technology in Northern Rivers communities, leading to several small *Networking the Nation*-funded projects. In the third stage, Norlink investigated potential telecommunications partners, contemplating a model of subsidising an existing national carrier to become the regional telco.

By mid-November 2000, however, Norlink had adopted a new model of how to achieve a regional telco: they now proposed to set up a commercial organisation with several different technology partners, which, over a two to three year period, would increase its capabilities to become a fully-fledged telco serving the area. In this fourth stage, Norlink formulated a strategic plan, presented this to selected potential partners, negotiated with these, and finalised its business case. In July 2001, this process was assisted by the announcement of a \$1.5 million *Networking the Nation* grant. Part of an 'access strategy' of the Norlink strategic plan, this money will allow a trial of three Northern Rivers towns (of less than 3000 people), using the latest generation of Wireless Local Loop technology to deliver both voice and high speed data services, in order to develop deployment models for this technology throughout the region. This trial will be conducted in 2002.

While projects such as the Norlink one hold much promise, there are two points worth recognising here. Firstly, it has been government rather than large corporations which has been grudgingly forced to recognise and engage with this new face of dispersed, regional telecommunications activity, as development of a sound commercial basis for such local markets has been difficult to develop. Secondly, while the RTIF has funded an impressive range of projects, catalysed by active citizenry, the result has been a mosaic of telecommunications and internet solutions. In the absence of a systematic evaluation of the RTIF as a program, it appears to have filled significant gaps in telecommunications and internet access, and some genuine innovation has occurred at the local community level. However, the program can be criticised, I would suggest, for being rather haphazard and not sufficiently coordinated. There is also a difficulty for communities in sustaining their enthusiasm and planning over the medium to long term: for instance, there is frustration in being awarded seeding funding, but then not having sufficient funds to actually make infrastructure a reality. Such concerns have been registered by the Federal Government's Besley Report, which proposes a more strategic approach to government funding programs such as *Networking the Nation*, and argues that 'appropriately structured and targeted funding programs can play a positive role in assisting communities to meet their communications needs' (Besley 2000: 174). Unfortunately, the government's policy response in May 2001 did not satisfactorily take up this challenge (Alston 2001b).

Thus the lack of a systematic government policy response to regional telecommunications poses problems. Large corporations based in metropolises have been surprisingly slow to recognise some of the possibilities for rural communications, and are forfeiting significant commercial opportunities. Moreover, the local telecommunications model has attracted much attention, but the actual number of new infrastructure providers in non-metropolitan Australia so far remains small. The Productivity Commission notes that: 'Most of these new regional networks are either still being deployed or in the very early stages of developing customer bases and as yet appear to have had little impact on competition. Indeed, there can be a large gap between planning and implementation' (Productivity Commission 2001a: 15.10). This can be seen with respect to the deployment of high speed technologies for access to the internet, with two-way satellite technologies not available, deployment of Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) technologies unlikely in rural and remote Australia in the foreseeable future, and low rates of deployment of hybrid optic fibre-coaxial cable technology (which allows use of cable modems) compared to other countries:

Lower population densities and longer average line lengths in remote and rural areas adversely affect the cost of deploying some high speed technologies in these areas. As a consequence, remote and rural users are unlikely to have the same degree of technology choice as urban users (Productivity Commission 2001b: 120).

It would appear that the dominant paradigm of competition policy itself, as well as its instantiation in telecommunications policy, is fraught with problems. Competition has in many ways delivered consumers a choice of a greater range of services, better quality, and (modestly so), lower prices. However, the Productivity Commission itself has found that there was more likely to be greater variation in the incidence of the benefits and costs of national competition policy in country as compared to metropolitan areas (Productivity Commission 1999). Not only is there a lack of telecommunications competition in country areas, but this is compounded in the important kindred area from which convergent media will emerge - digital broadcasting, where the free-to-air broadcasters have managed to persuade the government to allow them to get first-mover rights in the crucial new technologies of digital television and datacasting. This latest broadcasting policy mishap adds to the difficulties in local telecommunications identified above, threatening rather than protecting our cultural futures, as the Productivity Commission Broadcasting Inquiry Final Report suggests (Productivity Commission 2000), with real consequences for what has been termed 'cultural citizenship' (Miller 1998; Hartley 2000).

Compared to digital broadcasting, telecommunications does look doubtless as if it has been 'modernised' (O'Regan 2000; Goldsmith *et al* 2001), even in rural Australia. Yet I would question the normativity encoded in the attitude that competition is *the* only option for policy, and that it moves us towards some necessary stage in a project of modernity and modernisation. Competition can play a role in safeguarding the interests of citizens and consumers, but it has marked limitations, shortcomings which may be more apparent in a smaller country such as Australia than elsewhere. Should we not continue to question the logic of competition which sees the benefits of competition inequitably distributed through the market, as rebalancing and deaveraging of prices begin to be adopted? And what of the circumstance where effective competition is apparently in place (as many believe is the case now), yet this belies clear cases of inequality? The term 'market failure' is too narrow to capture the real sense in which the market systematically ignores the needs and expectations of many people. One example of this is in the area of

services for people with disabilities, where it has been recently argued that 'the competitive environment has in many ways seen the deterioration of the rights of people with disability', and that 'the value of real participation in communications for people with disabilities has not been factored in to the utilitarian ethics of competition policy' (Goggin and Newell, 2000a: 90).

More fundamentally, competition is beset, like capitalism, by its own contradictions. At the time of writing, the rise and fall of One.Tel is a timely reminder of this. Australia is a small market, telecommunications is a very complex, expensive industry to set up, not least in rural Australia, and oligopoly is likely to be our fate. It may be argued, as Minister Alston does, that the One.Tel collapse is just a natural consequence of the market in action (though parliamentarians are more wary of arguing this with respect to the collapse of competitors in our airlines industry, such as Ansett). I am not sure that the workers (such as those in call centres on individual contracts) nor the consumers nor shareholders affected smilingly take this view. Rather, many citizens call for government or regulatory response.

It would not be an exaggeration to regard this state of affairs in regional telecommunications as a policy failure. Lack of a robust framework for viable advanced telecommunications in rural Australia has implications for other, closely related areas of communications and regional developments, such as convergent digital media. To take one example of this, in 2000 there was excitement in the Northern Rivers accompanying the formation of a peak film and multimedia association under the rubric of 'FilmWorks'. The aim of the FilmWorks grouping, now translated into an industry body called ScreenWorks (<http://www.screenworks.com.au/>) is to build a viable film and multimedia industry in the Northern NSW area where many established and emerging practitioners are based, due to the lure of the alternative lifestyle in the area around Byron Bay (Henkel 2000). Instead of filmmakers, writers, directors, actors, musicians (Gibson 2000) and multimedia practitioners needing to travel to Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane to ply their trade, the dream is to bring work to the region, and also foster local culture (on regional cultural development see Trotter 2001).

Indeed, there is a great appetite among local citizens for screen culture, witnessed by the emergence of two local short film competitions and many screenings. Young people, in particular, are very interested in the prospect of distributing and showcasing video on-line, and developing multimedia content and applications. The film industry initiative has received backing from other local businesses and funding from regional economic development agencies. Proponents point out that it is an example of the recognition of the interdependence of cultural and economic development, what has been newly, and in a non-pejorative sense, termed 'cultural industries' (Bennett & Carter 2001: 2). Film in Northern Rivers has also been framed as an excellent example of how 'innovation' is at the heart of new media industries, and is necessarily linked to creation of cultural content, thus providing an opening for cultural producers to reshape their relationships to distributors, purchasers, broadcasters, and audiences (a phenomenon theorised under the rubric of 'creative industries,' as in the Faculty of Creative Industries, Queensland University of Technology), and also to reshape the geography of cultural production, reworking the relationship between centre and periphery in film, video, and multimedia industries (see also DCITA 2000; Goldsmith *et al* 2001).

Such visions of creative industries invigorated by innovative use of convergent media are stymied, however, by the lack of adequate, affordable, high-capacity telecommunications infrastructure. In metropolitan Australia in late 2001, new cultural and media forms are emerging, associated with networked distribution

platforms, including interactive digital television, broadband internet, and third-generation mobile telecommunications (to name just three). Already new hybrid cultural forms are being developed for the internet by network operators, webcasters, content packagers and producers (Jacka 2001). For instance, broadband content is already being conceived and implemented for delivery across existing and future convergent media platforms (Jacka 2001). Even when content is developed for a range of platforms (such as the Pacific Film and Television Agency's cross-media comedy series, *IT Girls*, developed with Granada, or their *Twin Peaks*-style mystery thriller, *Fat Cow Motel*, with AUSTAR) (Jacka 2001), rural dwellers may well not be able to access these new forms over some platforms, especially if they lack mobile phone for Short Messaging Service (SMS) or are still waiting for high bandwidth internet options - not to mention the supply-side difficulties of rurally-located industry practitioners.

There is a real danger that broadband futures will echo another episode of opportunity lost in the history of communications in the Northern Rivers. The area played an important role in the history of the internet in Australia, with the establishment of pioneering internet service provider Pegasus in Byron Bay in 1989. A member of the international network, Association for Progressive Communications, Pegasus was responsible for many Australian citizens, organisations, and institutions gaining their first internet access (Peters 1998 and 2001). Unfortunately, due to lack of suitable telecommunications infrastructure, Pegasus relocated to Brisbane in 1993.

Active Citizenship

Despite the shortcomings of the overall policy framework on local telecommunications, I wish to argue that these developments highlight fundamental changes in citizenship, subtle yet profound shifts which call out for new analytic frameworks to understand them. Here I find helpful the work of Nikolas Rose (Rose 1999), Toby Miller (Miller 1998), and others drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality (Foucault 2000). Such work points to the necessity of opening up the study, exploration and analysis of these innovative, productive discourses and sites of active citizenship and consumerism with respect to: consumer consultation, self-regulation, the refashioning of the national in the guise of local telecommunications, the cultural practices accompanying mobile telecommunications, and the social construction of disability through new media. This is rich material indeed, and a rich body of practices, standing in need of study, evaluation, and intervention.

Governmentality designates the sense in which we inhabit a society in which power is not centred simply in a state or in transnational corporations, but rather is dispersed across a network of loosely connected arenas and sites in which self-activating citizens are required to play a role in constructing and policing zones of circumscribed autonomy and freedom. In the discourse of competitive telecommunications, an active, sophisticated citizenship is called forth to do the work of making choice, competition, and new networked technologies possible. Thus we see much evidence of the rise of the consumer-citizen (evidenced by the 1997 *Telecommunications Act* creating a 'customer service guarantee' in telecommunications), and the role she or he is expected to play as a self-propelling, engaged agent. There is considerable work entailed in being free to choose, as well as many tasks required to participate in governance's reworking - for instance, under the rubric of industry self-regulation.

Nikolas Rose underlines the way in which 'advanced liberal forms of government' rest upon the 'activation of the powers of the citizen':

Citizenship is no longer primarily realized in a relation with the state, or in a single 'public sphere', but in a variety of private, corporate and quasi-public practices from working to shopping. The citizen as consumer is to become an active agent in the regulation of professional expertise ... Even in politics ... the citizen is to enact his or her democratic obligations as a form of consumption (Rose 1999: 166).

Rose locates the ground of this new citizen in something believed to be prior to the social, something that appeared 'to have a more powerful, and yet more natural, existence: community' (Rose 1999: 166). In telecommunications, it is the area of local or regional telecommunications in which this reinvention of community as citizenship's milieu is significant. Citizens are now required to be self-activating to realise their communications rights. Especially in rural areas citizens are called on to be actively involved in local telecommunications decision-making and governance to fashion options, where neither the market (competition) nor the state (universal service; direct funding) will provide the ubiquitous, affordable infrastructures seen as critical for twenty-first century life, such as broadband communications.

Capital Flight

The active citizen of governmentality is helpful for understanding a novel dimension of citizenship, especially in the area of telecommunications, with its peculiar incarnations in non-metropolitan areas. However, I contend that citizenship conceived in this manner needs to be supplemented by a refashioning of older notions of citizenship, such as a reworking of T.H. Marshall's classic theory (Marshall 1964), as well as other work which comprehends the role that capital plays in new ways in forging citizenship in the twenty-first century (Calabrese & Burgelman 2000; Goggin 1998; Hudson & Kane 2000), including feminist accounts of citizenship (Voet 1998). Such frameworks give the necessary purchase to challenge the dominance of the competition paradigm, and the contradictions it entails.

A new economics is needed to complement our refashioned notions of power to articulate more precise and challenging notions of citizenship. A study of telecommunications reforms in the USA and Canada has questioned the dominant assumption of telecommunications reform that vigorous competition will establish itself, very soon now:

It is difficult to imagine how public policy for the telecommunications sector will be able to escape its enslavement to neo-classical dogma. In fact, policy for the telecommunications industry will surely be caught in a conceptual no-man's-land between the alleged promise of neo-classical economics and the hard reality of the facility providers' near categorical refusal to compete with one another, all the while eliminating competition whenever it emerges in the margins of their industry (Wilson 2000: 281).

In the shadow of capital's failure, most marked in non-metropolitan Australia, we need to fashion a different language and paradigm for constructing our technologies and understanding their economics (Wilson 2000).

Telecommunications is indeed now very complex, but so too are the demands and expectations of citizens. This poses significant challenges for governments and companies in gaining an early understanding of the implications of an astounding

array of new technologies for consumer-citizens. Such a project is imperative in order to articulate sustainable and inclusive visions of telecommunications services for all in the midst of a market-based paradigm (Barr 2000), especially for those residing or relocating outside the cities. At stake are fundamental cultural and social, as well as economic, concerns for the coming century (Spurgeon 1998).

These convergent media developments, in which telecommunications are centrally implicated, condition possibilities for film, video, and multimedia production blossoming in the provinces, and have implications for the development of rural audiences and screen culture - and for the shape of the wired pastoral. Thus, the present state of our telecommunications has direct implications for the cultural experimentation that is under way in the interstices of Australia life, threatening to unfairly circumscribe the imaginings that sustain our unfolding lines of flight away from our metropolises, which otherwise could draw on convergent new media to create new sorts of connectedness among cities and regions, new kinds of communities, new sorts of becoming cosmopolitan.⁵

These new modes of governance and subjectivity, such as active citizenship, are an important context for understanding the wired pastoral - and how local telecommunications functions as a site of this. To understand new modes of fugitive becoming investigated in this issue of *Transformations*, we need to attend to the diffuse nodes of power concatenated and gathered together through local telecommunications networks. There are possibilities here of sustaining the split subjectivity I have signalled in the beginning of this article: the desire to flee the city, to abandon the weary ways of being 'metro-trash', and to become something outside the polis; yet the yearning to continue to enjoy urban pleasures while residing in the countryside. Advanced telecommunications networks and their coincidence with new forms of governance and subjectivity smooth the way for a new, dispersed notion of cities, the pleasures of city-dwelling outside cities, the inside and the outside of the city blurred. Such a blurring of boundaries, however, may demarcate new arenas of contest, usefully conceptualised with new notions of power. Fleeing the city, yet remaining intimately or even more thoroughly connected with it, I would suggest, may be understood through a new account of (telecommunicating) citizenship.

Endnotes

¹ My thanks to two referees for their helpful comments on this article.

² In a study of remote commercial television service and the putative dispelling of distance in rural and remote Western Australia, Lelia Green has argued while "new" technologies do not change total perceptions of distance, perceptions of the new technologies are formed according to the 'position' — the 'distance' — of the perceiver in relation to the core and periphery...new material is taken and appropriated for the individual's renegotiation of old boundaries and understandings' (Green 1998: 36).

³ As Helen Molnar has pointed out, the 'use of communications technology to unite a nation is not new ... [w]ith the advent of different communication and information technologies, television, satellites, computers and the Internet, similar promises have been made. At the same time, issues such as localism and cultural identity are downplayed in the public debate in the mainstream media' (Molnar 1998: 5-6).

⁴ These peak bodies are: Northern Rivers Regional Organisation of Councils (NOROC); Northern Rivers Regional Chamber of Commerce & Industry (NRRCCI);

Southern Cross University (SCU); Northern Rivers Regional Development Board (NRRDB); Northern Development Task Force (NDTF); Northern Rivers Regional Tourism Organisation (NRRTO); Regional Information Technology Industry Association (RITIA); NSW Farmers Association – Far North Coast; Housley Consulting.

⁵ I am grateful to Lucy Cameron for reminding me of the importance of this sort of citizenship. See Robbins & Cheah 1998 for reformulations of the cosmopolitan.

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