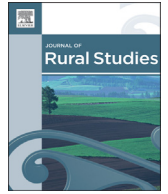




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## Editorial

## Rural resilience in a digital society: Editorial



## 1. Introduction

The development of digital technology across the globe has taken place at considerable speed; however, this has not been at an even pace within all places (Graham, 2011; Philip et al., 2015; Riddlesden and Singleton, 2014). There has been a fundamental unevenness to the delivery of digital technology in all its forms that has been shaped by existing geographic and social inequalities (Graham et al., 2012; Townsend et al., 2013) and has, in turn, shaped the characteristics of new inequalities. This special issue critically explores how, in different rural spaces, the delivery and use of digital technologies differs massively and how this can impact on the ability of rural communities to be resilient in an increasingly digital world. In following the multiple variations in availability, accessibility, quality and use of digital technologies in rural communities, this special issue highlights how different rural communities have, first, been significantly disadvantaged by slow delivery of post-dial up ('narrow band' or 'first generation') Internet telecommunications infrastructure and, second, going beyond an infrastructure-based narrative we evidence how rural communities have utilised pre-existing resilience to help improve their ability to maintain and improve social and economic relations where telecommunications infrastructure development has failed to keep pace with national and international advances.

This special issue originates from a Working Group convened at the 25th Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology, 2013, organised by researchers from the RCUK dot.rural Digital Economy Hub at the University of Aberdeen. The Working Group brought together European-based scholars concerned with the level of broadband infrastructure available to rural communities in the context of the European Digital Agenda for Europe (DAE). This translated at that time, across many countries, as the market-led roll out of Superfast Broadband. Papers presented at the Congress explored the types and degrees of disadvantage associated with the lack of access to broadband infrastructure and technologies that rural – particularly remote – communities experience and the ways they seek to overcome the challenges arising from barriers to fit for purpose Internet access and associated relative disadvantage. In this special issue contributions from those who participated in the 2013 ESRS Congress are joined by contributions from other, non-European, scholars to lend a more international perspective, albeit one that focuses on the global North.

The special issue marks the current 'state of play' for rural-digital agendas. This Editorial Introduction highlights the major contributions that the collection of papers offers in terms of interventions within the overlapping academic literature on rural digital divides, digital inclusion, rural development and resilience. It draws

together policy recommendations (Roberts, Anderson, Skerratt and Farrington, 2017; Salemink, Strijker and Bosworth, 2017; Philip, Cottrill, Farrington, Williams and Ashmore, 2017) and outlines 'ways forward' for ongoing research in this field. Furthermore, it speaks to wider concerns in rural studies around neo-endogenous development and how conceptualisations of the 'networked' or 'relational' rural (Heley and Jones, 2012; Shucksmith, n.d.; Woods, 2009) are complicated or re-stated by (lack of) access and use of internet-enabled technologies, as well as explorations of multi-functional rurality and diversification, through reference to a range of sectors (business, heritage, health) and their interactions with internet-enabled technologies (Beel, Wallace, Webster, Nguyen, Tait, Macleod and Mellish, 2017; Townsend, Wallace, Fairhurst and Anderson, 2017; Hodge, Carson, Carson, Newman and Garrett, 2017). The special issue also provides a much needed reminder to contemporary digital sociological and digital geography scholars of the implicit urban bias in 'pervasive' and 'ubiquitous' technologies discourse. For example, the proliferation of smart cities, creative cities and recently published work on neogeography (Graham et al., 2012; Haklay et al., 2008; Wilson and Graham, 2013) is overwhelmingly situated in an urban context. This does not reflect the life-worlds of everybody and papers in this special issue contribute to the body of evidence on how the rural sits in relation to technologies discourse.

Our collection of papers highlight the differentiation of rural Internet users through empirical case studies of rural creative industries and high-skilled workers (Townsend et al., 2017; Ashmore et al., 2017), of older rural populations (Hodge et al., 2017) of rural service providers (Pant and Hambly-Odame, 2017; Hodge et al., 2017; Beel et al., 2017) and in terms of peripheral and isolated communities and socio-economic differences (Philip et al., 2017; Park, 2017; Wallace et al., 2017). It also highlights varying contextual factors such as policy across rural communities and UK national and European scale (Roberts et al., 2017; Salemink et al., 2017; Philip et al., 2017). A strength of this special issue is the combination of scales and methods at which analyses are carried out; the contributions range from fine-grained, qualitative research on community-level case studies, to large systematic policy and literature reviews at European and International scales, to quantitative National-level and regional studies.

Contributions to the Special Issue are grouped into two sections. The first group are presented under the heading 'ICT, infrastructure and digital divides'. These contributions synthesise current literature on the rural digital divide, assess National-level policy responses and evaluate community-led alternatives for accessing broadband infrastructure. The second group deal more broadly with the use and benefits of the internet in rural areas. Under the heading 'Harnessing digital technologies and crossing divides',

these papers illustrate how broadband internet access has provided opportunities (although barriers still exist) in different rural places and overlapping rural sectors including business, health, heritage and local services. We first introduce all the contributions to the Special Issue below, followed by reflections on relationships between rural digital society and notions of 'Rural Resilience' that stem from the research our contributing authors have presented. We conclude by suggesting how we can move forward with regards to future research on rural resilience and digital technology.

## 2. ICT, infrastructure and digital divides

Digital divides refer to the uneven ways in which people have access to digital technology. This presents itself and is created through a number of factors, including, for example accessibility of different technologies (e.g.: expensive equipment), provision of technologies (e.g.: the telecommunications infrastructure), and education (e.g.: not knowing how to use different technologies). Singly or in combination these factors contribute to the ways in which people are disadvantaged in their ability to make use of digital technologies. The first set of papers in this Special Issue address the issue of digital divides from a number of illuminating positions. They reflect a more nuanced conception of digital unevenness than a simple rural-urban divide.

Salemink, Strijker and Bosworth's paper offers a comprehensive review of the literature on digital divides and charts its progression over the last decade or so, drawing international comparisons. It reviews digital policy from countries across the global North and concludes with recommendations for future policy that suggest how to better position rural areas in future digital society developments. The contribution distinguishes two major strands of research, connectivity research and inclusion research and argues that these strands should be combined to create 'customised policies' to address digital divides in future digital policy agendas.

Roberts, Anderson, Skerratt and Farrington scrutinise the European rural-digital policy agenda in their paper, using a community resilience framework to critically assess the mechanisms and assumptions through which it functions. Community resilience, sustainability and associated proxies are frequently mentioned in inclusion and digital infrastructure policy statements, via assumed future benefits and the responsabilisation of local groups to create their own access (community broadband initiatives) and support structures (digital inclusion voluntary charters or champions). Focusing on the translation of the European policy agenda into a UK context they find that the language surrounding rural broadband infrastructure policy in the UK contains normative claims about its capacity to aid rural development, offer solutions to rural service provision and the challenges of implementing localism. However, their analysis suggests that digital inclusion policy is currently piecemeal, focusing on 'show cases' without a coherent rural focus.

Philip, Cottrill, Farrington, Williams and Ashmore's paper follows the rollout of broadband to the 'final few' rural communities within the UK. The paper reports an analysis of data published by the UK's telecommunications regulator, Ofcom and a series of qualitative vignettes which together highlight the real and lived uneven geography of digital infrastructure supply to rural areas. It then shows how this impacts most heavily on the most remote areas. The paper contributes to our understanding of the paradox faced by rural communities and policy makers in delivering broadband through a market driven approach. That is, the rural communities that would potentially benefit most from better broadband connectivity in both economic and social terms are always furthest away from that delivery. This raises serious questions about the economic viability and long term sustainability of remote rural communities

as well as impacting upon the ability for such communities to be resilient in difficult economic times. Finally, the paper also challenges public policy makers to think through better ways of delivering broadband provision so that rural communities are not further disadvantaged by market driven approaches.

Sora Park highlights the intersection of multiple factors that influence rural digital exclusion. She uses data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics to show that whilst remoteness was a key determinant of rural digital exclusion, other sociodemographic variables including, for example, educational achievement and employment status also played a significant role. The need for building better capacity in rural areas is stressed, with the authors arguing that both supply (infrastructure) and demand (education and employment opportunities, industry sector and socio-demographics) must be considered in the development of future rural digital inclusion strategies.

Ashmore, Farrington and Skerratt move the scale of analysis to the community-level. Their paper compares two rural community-led broadband initiatives, one in Northern England and one in Scotland. They find that strong leadership and processes and structures that actively encourage participation can enhance resilience-building overall, but that this is best served by a joined-up approach that links actors and development priorities at local and extra-local levels. For example, digital champions or leaders are critical for resource identification and gaining engagement within a community when starting the process of setting up a local digital infrastructure network. However leaders can sometimes entrench existing inequalities and feelings of exclusion, ultimately detracting from other community member's capacity or desire to engage.

## 3. Moving beyond simple rural-urban digital divides: harnessing digital technologies

The second set of papers sit within the wider literature on digital divides that explicitly seeks to move digital divide debates beyond considerations framed around a simple user and non-users binary (Park et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2017). Internet users do not all have access to the same spectrum of online activities, reflecting differences in users' abilities to consistently access reliable, high speed internet connectivity or to access the technologies that enable them to use the internet effectively at a reasonable cost. Multiple socio-economic factors influence an individuals' capacity to go online, including potentially fluctuating interest and needs. The second set of papers encourages us to think about what qualifies as 'digital participation' or 'engagement' alongside better understandings of levels of use, the utility of digital connectivity and its 'meaningfulness' for individuals and rural communities. The contributions all illustrate why it is important to move beyond viewing rural (non) users as a homogenous group.

Wallace, Vincent, Luguzan, Townsend and Beel's paper introduces social cohesion in terms of system integration (organisational, communal spaces on and offline) and social integration (informal, networks, sense of belonging). This conceptualisation is a useful point of entry for an evaluation of intertwining on and offline relationships at community level and the extent to which these foster social cohesion, an important contributor to community resilience. Contrasting two rural communities in Northern Scotland, their study concludes that ICT is becoming an integral part of rural social relations but it can play very different roles with regards to promoting and sustaining social cohesion for different social and cultural groups, as well as for different kinds of locational communities. This paper draws on research undertaken in two communities with access to broadband internet and, like Park et al. shows that factors other than access/no access to broadband,

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