A review of the rural-digital policy agenda from a community resilience perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper utilises a community resilience framework to critically examine the digital-rural policy agenda. Rural areas are sometimes seen as passive and static, set in contrast to the mobility of urban, technological and globalisation processes (Bell et al., 2010). In response to notions of rural decline (McManus et al., 2012) rural resilience literature posits rural communities as 'active,' and 'proactive' about their future (Skerratt, 2013), developing processes for building capacity and resources. We bring together rural development and digital policy-related literature, using resilience motifs developed from recent academic literature, including community resilience, digital divides, digital inclusion, and rural information and communication technologies (ICTs). Whilst community broadband initiatives have been linked to resilience (Plunkett-Carnegie, 2012; Heesen et al., 2013) digital inclusion, and engagement with new digital technologies more broadly, have not. We explore this through three resilience motifs: resilience as multi-scalar; as entailing normative assumptions; and as integrated and place-sensitive. We point to normative claims about the capacity of digital technology to aid rural development, to offer solutions to rural service provision and the challenges of implementing localism. Taking the UK as a focus, we explore the various scales at which this is evident, from European to UK country-level.

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1. Introduction

This paper will outline the policy imperatives in rural development and digital agenda contexts for the increased resilience of individuals and communities through Internet connectivity and eServices. The paper contributes to existing literature on community resilience, within the broader context of rural studies. Due to the pervasiveness of digital processes in contemporary society, and as ICTs become an integral, sometimes invisible, aspect of rural life, rural scholars are increasingly obliged to consider digital divides and rural technologies. Technology more broadly is at the centre of many rural debates, including biotechnology and GM crops (Woods, 2012). Nonetheless, digital technology remains a niche topic in rural studies. The dynamic, multi-scale processes of digitally-enabled rural resilience are an important addition to the complex picture of rurality developing in current research.

The paper reports on findings from a review of EU and UK policy-related documents from 2005 to 2015 (see Appendix 1), with a comprehensive analysis of how these play out at UK country level over the last five years.[1] These cover the digital agenda, rural and community development. The review identifies where one policy field has referenced others (e.g. where digital agenda documents prioritise or mention rural areas and/or community-led approaches) and where community resilience is explicitly referenced or inferred through proxy terms (see Table 1). This policy and grey literature is analysed through relevant critiques from recent academic literatures, bringing them together at the intersection of rural-digital agendas and resilient communities. A central aim of the paper is to interrogate this relationship. We ask: through what channels is enhanced rural resilience enacted or proposed in policy

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[1] By 'policy-related document' we mean any communications produced by or for government bodies that are accessible to the public.

Table 1
Table of resilience terms and overlapping terminology/proxies used in policy.

Resilience term	Encompassing or overlapping themes	Proxies in policy Docs
Self-organising/ mobilising	Agency, efficacy, pro-active, responsibility, collective capacity	'empower' 'enable' 'engage' 'responsibilisation' 'participation' 'widen choice' 'partnerships' 'independently' ' local development
Social Capital	Networks; connectedness; support structures; cohesive;	'inclusion' 'exclusion' 'cohesion' 'participation' 'connectedness' 'networked' 'reduce isolation'
Social learning	Social memory; Social capital; peer learning	'Life-long learning' 'Developing knowledge base' 'Knowledge transfer' 'informal learning' 'social innovation' ' digital champions' 'partnerships' 'community based learning'
Capacity	Resources; resourcefulness; stocks; assets; capitals (social, economic, environmental);	'Skills' 'Ability' 'Confidence' 'Competitiveness' 'resource efficient' 'capacity building'
Multi-scalar	Interacting scales; resilience pathways; lock-in; outwards-facing communities	'Facilitate' 'encourage' 'support' 'Promote' 'Outwards-facing communities' 'links between urban and rural' ' city regions' 'providing incentives' 'stimulate the market' 'scale up'
Adaptation	Adaptability; Adaptive capacity; diversification	'Sustainable management' 'Innovation' 'social and cultural resistance to change' 'transformation' 'transition' ' greener' 'Facilitating diversification'
Health	Well-being; Quality of life; Mobility	'eHealth' 'self-care' 'independent living' 'Access to health services/Accessibility'

contexts? And: what are the social and policy constructs working together in rural-digital agendas? What are the relative disadvantages of digital disconnection for rural community resilience?

We specifically look to develop three motifs developing in current resilience literature: resilience as multi-scalar; as normatively constructed; and, as an integrated approach. We examine the extent to which the policy context evidences 1) discourse embedded within multiple scales, 2) technology solutions for resilience as normative within digital and rural agendas and 3) as being integrated and place-appropriate. The paper will do this systematically in four sections: 1) *Resilience frameworks* introduces resilience as a framework for analysis of community change and development; 2) *Ruralities* addresses resilience within the rural context through relevant policy-related documents; 3) *Divides* examines the rural-digital policy agenda and its relevance to community resilience. 4) A final discussion section will reintroduce the three resilience motifs at the intersection of digital and rural (community) development, drawing out implications and recommendations as a conclusion.

2. Resilience frameworks

In this section we introduce frameworks for understanding and evaluating resilience. We draw out three central themes that are significant for understanding the role of new digital technologies and broadband Internet for rural resilience. Whilst there might be a desire in policy arenas to identify resilience 'typologies' with related quantifiable indicators (Weichselgartner and Kelman, 2015), this paper focuses on wider motifs arising in resilience literature that also question and critique exactly what resilience means rather than accept it as stable or always necessarily 'good' for everyone. A contribution to these critiques comes from discussions in rural studies about neo-endogenous or 'networked' development, 'the global countryside' (Woods, 2007) and relational rurality (Heley and Jones, 2012), stressing the need to 'blend the local with the extra-local in building resilient places' whereby local resources are developed so that rural communities have the capacity to steer wider processes in a global context (Scott, 2013 p. 603; Wilson, 2012a,b; Shucksmith and Talbot, 2015) and highlighting the non-linearity, processual and messiness of rural places.

2.1. Understanding and evaluating resilience

Resilience is understood as the capacity of individuals and communities to proactively adapt to constant change through processes of building capacity and resources:

Community resilience is the existence, development and engagement of community resources by community members… [who]…intentionally develop personal and collective capacity to respond to and influence change, to sustain and renew the community, and to develop new trajectories for the communities' future (Magis, 2010, p.402).

Whilst deriving from the study of ecological systems and their capacity to bounce-back after disturbance or shock (Folke et al., 2002), resilience research has developed to encompass socio-ecological systems as adaptive to change (Adger, 2000; Norris et al., 2008), acknowledging both that change is on-going (Magis, 2010) and that a system involving humans does not consist of neutral processes but involves active agents and power-relations (Davidson, 2010). Within this framework, communities are heterogeneous, encompassing competing groups, individuals and values (Schouten et al., 2012). Resilience is described, in theoretical literature, as an ideal end goal, acknowledging that no community is fully resilient or fully vulnerable but displays aspects of both, and these are temporally and spatially changeable (Wilson, 2012a,b). Therefore resilience should be thought of not only as an outcome, but also as a process (Wilson, 2012a,b; Magis, 2010). Resilience frameworks vary and are developing through attempts to encompass place-specific and social aspects such as these.

At the community level, resilience is being used as a framework to evaluate the impact of local, community-level initiatives often linked to sustainable development and the transition movement, such as community land ownership (Skerratt, 2013), complementary currencies (Graugaard, 2012), local food initiatives (Franklin et al., 2011) and community gardening (Okvat and Zautra, 2011). Much resilience research has had an empirical focus on rural contexts (Cote and Nightingale, 2011). Rural resilience research explores: appropriate policy for EU rural development (Schouten et al., 2012); innovation and learning in rural SMEs (Glover, 2012); and interaction between farmers and town communities for sustaining rural populations (McManus et al., 2012). This is done using frameworks for evaluating resilience that encompass the social, economic and environmental aspects of place-based communities, capitals models (e.g. cultural capital; see Beel et al., 2015 – this issue; Roberts and Townsend, 2015), community stocks or assets (borrowing from community development literature). The framework necessarily varies according to the topic of conversation, but might include social capital, social memory and peer learning as indicators of social capital; localisation processes, the amount and type of local businesses or access to funding