



# Cultural resilience: The production of rural community heritage, digital archives and the role of volunteers



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## ABSTRACT

The following paper addresses a lacuna in the literature relating to the concept of resilience. To date, cultural activity in relation to resilient communities has been given little attention and this paper will highlight how the lens of community heritage activities and the 'bottom-up' role of volunteer labour can act as a catalyst for building more resilient communities in rural areas. This develops from rural areas that have strong place identities, formed through the reproduction of traditional cultural practices alongside contemporary influences. These identities are performed and constructed through a varied repertoire of knowledges, histories, and customs. Their on-going production can be central to community identity as they attempt to make visible their own accounts of history and place. Beyond this, community heritage organisations have also begun to have grounded 'impacts' that move away from heritage interests alone, often revitalising buildings and providing community services. This will be used to highlight how such cultural heritage activity builds collective resilience. A further trend (in the UK) has been for community heritage groups to digitise collections, due to the perceived transformational effect for community regeneration, the strengthening of community cohesion and the potential socio-economic benefits. In partnership with community heritage groups, the CURIOS (Cultural Repositories and Information Systems) project explores two case studies in rural Scotland asking how community activity, connectivity and digital archives can support interest in local heritage as well as help develop more resilient communities.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper comprehends the concept of resilience through the lens of cultural heritage, as a means for building more resilient communities. This approach is something that the literature pertaining to resilience has largely failed to contemplate but needs to address in order to consider more thoroughly the processes through which communities build resilience in rural, remote and

peripheral locations (see Callaghan and Colton, 2007; Roberts and Townsend, 2015). By researching community led activity in rural locations, a different set of geographies, politics, micro-politics and representations of place and space come into being, especially by not following the urban (often seen as the main foci for cultural activity) bias in most research (see Kneafsey, 2001 or Markusen, 2007 for rural examples).

Cultural heritage in many rural locations operates on a number of levels, from professional museums and council run services through to voluntary groups such as historical societies. It is the work of the latter that this paper unpacks in three ways: firstly, what is meant by the concept of resilience in this context, and why, although problematic, it is still a useful term to think with; secondly, how voluntary community cultural/heritage work builds

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resilient communities that move beyond purely cultural functions; and thirdly, how in the contemporary setting their on-going resilience has led to a shift towards digital mediums for heritage collection and dissemination through projects such as CURIOS, as well as other digital mediums such as websites, blogs and social media. The viewpoint that is given by following place-based rural community cultural heritage production offers a different perspective within the resilience literature that attempts to leave ecological definitions of the term behind by placing it firmly within the context of human agency and social systems.

The paper will begin by introducing (briefly) the CURIOS project. The project has involved innovative interdisciplinary research. The computer science element of the project has included novel development of semantic web/linked data technologies, which will be discussed briefly in Section 2. However it is the novel social science aspect that will be the focus of this paper. The paper will then unpack the concept of resilience in relation to the activities of community heritage societies in rural locations before moving on to open up the placing of community heritage and its cultural remit in relation to the researched historical societies. The emphasis will then shift to cover how resilient community heritage groups are turning to a digital praxis in the preservation of their historical and cultural heritage. Finally, the paper will conclude with its main findings.

## 2. CURIOS

CURIOS is an interdisciplinary project based upon both social science and computer science research, which has been developed in conjunction with community heritage groups to create a system that makes use of semantic web/linked data technology (see Mäkelä et al., 2012, for previous use with cultural heritage). This is in order to build a general, flexible and “future proof” software platform that can help community heritage volunteers maintain a digital presence that is sustainable over time. Key to this project's development has been conducting empirical research into the ways in which community heritage groups' function, in order to comprehend the socialised process of memory work (Nora, 1989) that is taking place. This has been invaluable in terms of how we moved to develop CURIOS but it has also generated innovative social science research in itself.

We have been working with two case study examples in rural Scotland, one with *Comainn Eachdraidh* (Gaelic for Historical Societies) groups based on the Isle of Lewis called Hebridean Connections and the other with historical societies based in the town of Portsoy on the Moray Coast. Both case studies give highly relevant perspectives in terms of how resilient behaviour is enacted through cultural activity, which has in turn led towards a desire to develop digital collections. Added to this, each case study area is based in a rural location (in Scotland) that are in some way peripheral and distant from more established and resourced urban centres. They each encounter issues relating to depopulation and ageing populations common to rural areas, as well as being faced with lower broadband connectivity in comparison to urban areas.

It is within these case study examples that the following empirical work will be based. In both cases the historical societies represent groups of volunteers attempting to articulate their own narrative of history that is largely driven by their collective sense of place, and in the process of doing so they have become further-reaching in terms of their remit to build resilience, enact change and, at times, bind communities together through their historical production. It is important to note that the groups in Lewis and Portsoy have very different histories and reasons for coming into existence, however they both embody aspects of cultural resilience in the way they work and what they have done and are doing, and it

is this that the following paper will divulge. These two case studies offer fascinating insights into the role of community heritage for building resilient communities, as well as to why both desire to hold their collections in digital forms alongside their analogue collections.

CURIOS as an application represents a form of action research (see Reason and Bradbury, 2006) which through its development uses digital technologies as a mechanism that can enable rural communities to be more resilient through enhancing existing practices. The need for using digital technology is one in which the communities themselves have identified as the next step in their on-going practices and represents a way in which to push their collections beyond their locality. Castell's (2001:155) notes that communication technologies represent a ‘*space of flows*’ that to a certain extent has the ability to compact issues created by geographic distance. This allows for distant locations and people to be connected through technology as well as allowing for local communities to find new ways of working together and collaborating. This is especially important for rural areas as Galloway et al. (2011) have noted that digital technologies have become more and more relied upon as a means of survival. It is hence the unfolding of these processes that is paper wishes to consider in relation to resilience whereby digital technology builds on and enhances the resilience of rural communities as they move existing ‘analogue’ structures or cultural production into ‘digital’ forms. Digital technology is therefore seen as a contributing factor to the ways in which community resilience can be built in new and novel ways.

## 3. Resilience

Within the social sciences the concept of resilience has not engaged with thinking through the ways culture and cultural activity produce resilient behaviour through practice (within psychology there has been some discussion to this, see Theron et al., 2015 for example). This paper will therefore develop the concept to think through and empirically evidence the ways in which cultural practices develop resilient behaviours for rural communities.

The concept of resilience has developed at an exceedingly fast pace within recent social science literature, and although the concept has a much longer history (see Skerratt, 2013), its more recent rise to prominence has been in the wake of the current economic downturn. Here it is often described in terms of how communities react to external shocks (e.g. Pike et al., 2010; Wilson, 2010), but following Skerratt's (2013:36) lead to move away from this, this paper wishes to consider how ‘*human agency is central to resilience*’ in relation to the continued production of community heritage resources. This will be done by suggesting that, in the context of community heritage, the notion of resilience as human agency is useful in two ways. One, it gives an appropriate understanding as to how different cultural repertoires have been maintained and passed through subsequent generations. Two, it neatly describes a set of relationships and connections that continue to maintain those cultural repertoires in the present day, especially as practices move towards digital forms. In doing this, the aim is to extend the concept of resilience to consider how, by understanding the ‘*topologies of relationships between people*’ (Adams and Ghose, 2003:419), this constructs place in both physical and virtual forms. Essential to understanding this form of resilience is considering the importance of cultural activity as a key driver to these actions. This is something that, to date, has not been addressed by the academic work on resilience (Callaghan and Colton (2007)).

Within the resilience literature, due to its founding within ecological studies and hence a social Darwinist outset (see Holling, 1973, 1986 and Holling et al., 1995), resilience is often framed

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