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Developing the Rural Creative Economy 'from Below': Exploring Practices of Market-Building amongst Creative Entrepreneurs in Rural and Remote Scotland

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Abstract

Introduction

This paper is concerned with recent attempts to develop the creative economy in rural Scotland. Research shows that the creative economy is far from self-organising, and that an appropriate institutional landscape is important to its development (Andersson and Henrekson). In Scotland, there is a proliferation of support mechanisms – from those designed to help creative entrepreneurs improve their business, management, or technical expertise, to infrastructure projects, to collective capacity-building. In rural Scotland, this support landscape is particularly cluttered. This article tackles the question: How do rural creative entrepreneurs negotiate this complex funding and support landscape, and how do they aid the development of the rural creative economy 'from below'?

From Creative Industries to the Creative Economy

The creative industries have been central to the UK's economic growth strategy since the 1990s. According to the Centre for Economics and Business Research the creative industries contributed £5.9bn to the economy in 2013 (CEBR 17). In the last five years there have been significant improvements in ICTs, leading to growth in digital creative production, distribution, and consumption. The established creative industries, along with the nascent 'digital industries' are often grouped together as a separate economic sector – the 'creative economy' (Nesta *A Manifesto for the Creative Economy*).

Given its close association with creative city discourses (see Florida 2002), research on the creative economy remains overwhelmingly urban-focused. As a result of this urban bias, the rural creative economy is under-researched. Bell and Jayne (2009) note that in the last decade a small body of academic work on the rural creative economy has emerged (Harvey et al.; White). In particular, the Australian context has generated a wealth of discussion as regards national and regional attempts to develop the rural creative economy, the contribution of 'creativity' to rural economic and social development, sustainability and resilience, and the role that individual creative practitioners play in developing the rural creative economy (see Argent et al.; Gibson, Gibson and Connell; Waitt and Gibson).

In the absence of suitable infrastructure, such as: adequate transport infrastructure, broadband and mobile phone connectivity, workspaces and business support, it often falls to rural creative practitioners themselves to 'patch the gaps' in the institutional infrastructure. This paper is concerned with the ways in which rural creative practitioners attempt to contribute to the development of the creative economy 'from below'. ICTs have great potential to benefit rural areas in this respect, by "connecting people and places, businesses and services" (Townsend et al. *Enhanced Broadband Access* 581).

The Scottish Infrastructure

Since 1998, cultural policy has been devolved to Scotland, and has fallen under the control of the Scottish Government and Parliament. In an earlier examination of a Scottish creative business support agency, I noted that the Scottish Government has adopted a creative industries development strategy broadly in line with that coming out of Westminster, and subsequently taken up worldwide, and that the Scottish institutional infrastructure is extremely complex (Schlesinger et al.). Crucially, the idea of 'intervention', or, the availability of a draw-down programme of funding and support that will help creative practitioners develop a business from their talent, is key (Schlesinger).

The main funder for Scottish artists and creative practitioners is Creative Scotland, who distribute money from the Scottish Government and the National Lottery. Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) also offer funding and support for creative practitioners working in the Highlands and Islands region. Further general business support may be drawn down from Business Gateway (who work Scotland-wide but are not creative-industries specific), or Scottish Enterprise (who work Scotland-wide, are not creative-industries specific, and are concerned with businesses turning over more than £250,000 p.a.). Additionally, creative-sector specific advice and support may be sought from Cultural Enterprise Office (based in Glasgow and primarily serving the Central Belt), Creative Edinburgh, Dundee or Stirling (creative networks that serve their respective cities), the Creative Arts and Business Network (based in Dumfries, serving the Borders), and Emergents (based in Inverness, dealing with rural craftspeople and authors).

Methodology

The article draws on material gathered as part of three research projects, all concerned with the current support landscape for creative practitioners in Scotland. The first, 'Supporting Creative Business' was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the second, 'Towards a model of support for the rural creative industries' was funded by the University of Glasgow and the third, 'The effects of improved communications technology of rural creative entrepreneurs' funded by CREAtE, the Research Council's UK Centre for the Study of Copyright and New Business Models in the Creative Economy.

In all three cases, the research was theoretically and practically informed by the multi-sited ethnographies of cultural, creative and media work conducted by Moeran (*Ethnography at Work, The Business of Ethnography*) and Mould et al. Whilst the methodology for all three of my projects was ethnography, the methods utilised included interviews (n=23) – with interviewees drawn from across rural Scotland – participant and non-participant observation, and media and document analysis. Interviewees and study sites were accessed via snowball sampling, which was enabled by the measure of continuity between the three projects. This paper draws primarily on interview material and ethnographic 'vignettes'. All individuals cited in the paper are anonymised in line with the University of Glasgow's ethics guidelines.

Cities, Creativity, and 'Buzz'

As noted earlier, cities are seen as the driving force behind the creative industries; and accordingly, much of the institutional infrastructure that supports the rural creative industries is modelled on urban systems of intervention. Cities are seen as breeding grounds for creativity by virtue of what Storper and Venables call their 'buzz' – consider, for example, the sheer numbers of creative practitioners that congregate in cities, the presence of art schools, work spaces and so on. Several of the creative practitioners I spoke to identified the lack of 'buzz' as one key difference between working in cities and working from rural places:

It can be isolating out here. There are days when I miss art school, and my peers. I really valued their support and just the general chit chat and news. [...] And having everything on your doorstep. (Visual artist, Argyll)

Of course, rural creatives didn't equate the 'buzz' of activity in cities with personal or professional creative success. Rather, they felt that developing a creative business was made easier by the fact that most funders and support agencies were based in Scotland's Central Belt. The creatives resident there were able to take advantage of that proximity and the relationships that it enabled them to build, but also, the institutional landscape was supplemented by the creative 'buzz', which was difficult to quantify and impossible to replicate in rural areas.

Negotiating the Funding and Support Landscape

I spoke to rural creative practitioners about whether the institutional infrastructure – in this case, relevant policy at national and UK level, funding and support agencies, membership bodies etcetera – was adequate. A common perspective was that the institutional infrastructure was extremely complex, which acted as a barrier for creatives seeking funding and support:

Everything works ok, the problem is that there's so many different places to go to for advice, and so many different criteria that you have to meet if you wanted funding, and what's your first port of call, and it's just too complicated. I feel that as a rural artist I fall between the cracks [...] am I a creative business, a rural creative business, or just a rural business? (Craftsperson, Shetland)

Interviewees suggested that there were 'gaps' in the institutional infrastructure, caused not by the lack of appropriate policy, funders, or support agencies but rather by their proliferation and a sense of confusion about who to approach. Furthermore, funding agencies such as Creative Scotland have, in recent years, come under fire for the complexity of their funding and support systems:

They have simplified their application process, but I just can't be bothered trying to get anything out of Creative Scotland at the moment. I don't find their support that useful and they directed me to Cultural Enterprise Office when I asked for advice on filling in the form and tailoring the application, and CEO were just so pushed for time, I couldn't get a Skype with them. The issue with getting funding from anywhere is the teeny tiny likelihood of getting money, coupled with how time-consuming the application process is. So for now, I'm just trying to be self-sufficient without asking for any development funds. But I am not sure how sustainable that is. (Craftsperson, Skye, interview)

There was a sense that 'what works' to enable urban creative practitioners to develop their practice is not necessarily sufficient to help rural creatives. Because most policymakers, funders and support bodies are based in the Central Belt, rural creatives feel that the challenges they face are poorly understood. One arts administrator summed up why, stating

the problem is that people in the Central Belt don't get what we're dealing with up here, unless they've actually lived here. The remoteness, poor transport links, internet and mobile access [...] it impacts on your ability to develop your business. If I want to attend a course, some organisations will pay travel and accommodation. But they don't account for the fact that if I travel from Eigg, I'll need to work around the ferry times, which might mean two extra nights' accommodation plus the cost of travel ... we're excluded from opportunities because of our location. (Arts administrator, the Small Isles)

A further issue identified by several participants in this research is that funding and support agencies Scotland-wide tend to work to standardised definitions of the creative industries that privilege high-growth sectors (see Luckman). This led to many heritage and craft businesses feeling excluded. One local authority stakeholder told me,

exactly what the creative industries are, well that might be obvious on paper but real life is a bit more complicated. Where do we put a craftsperson whose craft work is done in her spare time but pays just enough to stop her needing a second job? How do we tell people like this, who say they are in the creative industries, that they aren't actually according to this criteria or that criteria? (Local authority stakeholder, Shetland, interview)

Creating Virtual 'Buzz'? The Potential of ICTs

According to 2015 OFCOM figures (10-12), in rural Scotland 85.9% of households can receive broadband, and 6.3% can receive superfast. The Scottish Government's ambition is to deliver superfast broadband to up to 90 per cent of premises in Scotland by March 2016, and to extend this to 95 per cent by 2017. Whilst the current landscape as regards broadband provision is far from ideal, there are signs that improved provision is profoundly affecting the way that rural creatives develop their practice, and the way they engage with the institutional infrastructure set up to support them.

At an industry event run by HIE in July 2015, a diverse panel of rural creatives spoke of how they exploited the possibilities associated with improved ICTs in order to offset some of the aforementioned problems of working from rural and remote areas. As the event was conducted under Chatham House rules, the following is adapted from field notes,

It was clear from the panel and the Q&A that followed that improved ICTs meant that creatives could access training and support in new ways—online courses and training materials, webinars, and one-on-one Skype coaching, training and mentoring. Whilst of course most people would prefer face-to-face contact in this respect, the willingness of training providers to offer online solutions was appreciated, and most of the creatives on the panel (and many in the audience) had taken advantage of these partial solutions.

The rural creatives on the panel also detailed the tactics that they used in order to 'patch the gaps' in the institutional infrastructure:

There were four things that emerged from the panel discussion, Q&A and subsequent conversations I had on how technology benefited rural creatives: peer support, proximity to decision-makers, marketing and sales, and heritage and provenance.

In terms of peer support, the panel felt that improved connectivity allowed them to access 'virtual' peer support through the internet. This was particularly important in terms of seeking advice regarding funding, business support and training, generating new creative ideas, and seeking emotional support from others who were familiar with the strains of running a creative business.

Rural creatives found that social media (in particular) meant that they had a closer relationship with 'distant' decision-makers. They felt able to join events via livestreaming, and took advantage of hash tagging to take part in events, 'policy hacks' and consultations. Attendees I spoke to also mentioned that prominent Government ministers and other decision-makers had a strong Twitter presence and made it clear that they were at times 'open' to direct communication. In this way, rural creatives felt that they could 'make their voices heard' in new ways.

In terms of marketing and sales, panel members found social media invaluable in terms of building online 'presence'. All of the panel members sold services and products through dedicated websites (and noted that improved broadband speeds and 3G meant that these websites were increasingly sophisticated, allowing them to upload photographs and video clips, or act as client 'portals'), however they also sought out other local creatives, or creatives working in the same sector in order to build visible networks on social media such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. This echoes an interview I conducted with a designer from Orkney, who suggested that these online networks allowed designers to build a rapport with customers, but also to showcase their products and build virtual 'buzz' around their work (and the work of others) in the hope their designs would be picked up by bloggers, the fashion press and stylists.

The designer on the panel also noted that social media allowed her to showcase the provenance of her products. As she spoke I checked her Twitter and Instagram feeds, as well as the feeds of other designers she was linked to; a large part of their 'advertising' through these channels entailed giving followers an insight into life on the islands. The visual nature of these media also allowed them to document how local histories of making had influenced their practice, and how their rural location had influenced their work. It struck me that this was a really effective way to capture consumers' imaginations.

As we can see, improved ICTs had a substantial impact on rural creatives' practice. Not only did several of the panel members suggest that improved ICTs changed the nature of the products that they could produce (by enabling them to buy in different materials and tools, and cultivate longer and more complex supply chains), they also noted that improved ICTs enabled them to cultivate new markets, to build stronger networks and to participate more fully in discussions with 'distant' policymakers and decision makers. Furthermore, ICTs were seen as acting as a *proxy* for 'buzz' for rural creatives, that is, face-to-face communication was still preferred, but savvy use of ICTs went some way to mitigating the problems of a rural location. This extends Storper and Venables's conceptualisation of the idea, which understands 'buzz' as the often-intangible benefits of face-to-face contact.

Problematically however, as Townsend et al. state, "rural isolation is amplified by the technological landscape, with rural communities facing problems both in terms of broadband access technologies and willingness or ability of residents to adopt these" (*Enhanced Broadband Access* 5). As such, the development activities of rural creatives are hampered by poor provision and a slow 'roll out' of broadband and mobile coverage.

Conclusions

This paper is concerned with recent attempts to develop the rural creative economy in Scotland. The paper can be read in relation to a small but expanding body of work that seeks to understand the distinctive formation of the rural creative industries across Europe and elsewhere (Bell and Jayne), and how these can best be developed and supported (White). Recent, targeted intervention in the rural creative industries speaks to concerns about the emergence of a 'two tier' Europe, with remote and sparsely-populated rural regions with narrow economic bases falling behind more resilient cities and city-regions (Markusen and Gadwa; Wiggering et al.), yet exactly how the rural creative industries function and can be further developed is an underdeveloped research area.

In order to contribute to this body of work, this paper has sketched out some of the problems associated with recent attempts to develop the creative economy in rural Scotland. On a Scotland-wide scale, there is a proliferation of policies, funding bodies, and support agencies designed to organise and regulate the creative economy. In rural areas, there is also an 'overlap' between Scotland-wide bodies and rural-specific bodies, meaning that many rural creatives feel as if they 'fall through the cracks' in terms of funding and support. Additionally, rural creatives noted that Central Belt-based funders and support agencies struggled to fully understand the difficulties associated with making a living from a rural location.

The sense of being distant from decision makers and isolated in terms of practice meant that many rural creatives took it upon themselves to develop the creative economy 'from below'. The creatives that I spoke to had an array of 'tactics' that they used, some of which I have detailed here. In this short paper I have focused on one issue articulated within interviews – the idea of exploiting ICTs in order to build stronger networks between creatives and between creatives and decision makers within funding bodies and support agencies. Problematically, however, it was recognised that these creative-led initiatives could only do so much to mitigate the effects of a cluttered, piecemeal funding and support landscape.

My research suggests that as it stands, 'importing' models from urban contexts is alienating and frustrating for rural creatives and targeted, rural-specific intervention is required. Research demonstrates that creative practitioners often seek to bring about social and cultural impact through their work, rather than engaging in creative activities merely for economic gain (McRobbie *Be Creative, Rethinking Creative Economies*; Waitt and Gibson). Whilst this is true of creatives in both urban and rural areas, my research suggests that this is particularly important to rural creatives, who see themselves as contributing economically, social and culturally to the development of the communities within which they are embedded (see Duxbury and Campbell; Harvey et al.). 'Joined up' support for this broad-based set of aims would greatly benefit rural creatives and maximise the potential of the rural creative industries.

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