

Reimagining the rural hinterland: an investigation of participatory digital placemaking in rural communities.

IRNSIDE, R. and REID, P.

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Reimagining the Rural Hinterland: An Investigation of Participatory Digital Placemaking in Rural Communities

By
Rachael Ironside & Peter Reid

Abstract

Rural locations often form a hinterland – geographically and culturally - for large conurbations that dominate a particular region. They are interconnected, sometimes interdependent, but also separated by the social and spatial perceptions of a place. For urban dwellers the hinterland is a place to ‘escape to the country’; for rural dwellers the town is the place of ‘bright lights’. The norms of either location often sit juxtaposed. This sense of place may be constructed from traditional, stereotypical ways of seeing and understanding communities. Digital technology has provided a platform to challenge these norms and provide new ways of representing the physical and cultural landscape of urban and rural spaces. In this paper we explore digital placemaking in the hinterland of the North-East of Scotland. In this region, the city (Aberdeen) dominates, but it is the rural hinterland that charms. Through an examination of co-created content of rural spaces in this region we consider the role of participatory digital placemaking. Drawing on an extensive body of previous research that has explored community heritage in the North-East of Scotland, we use case studies to consider the ways in which images, iconography and language shape and inform perceptions of the rural space in the digital environment. We argue that this bottom-up approach to placemaking in rural areas can help to shape the way that places are seen, understood, and valued by communities, visitors and wider online audiences. To conclude, this paper reflects on how rural participatory digital placemaking counteracts the urban norm and connects communities across town and country through a reimagined digital hinterland.

Keywords: rural, hinterland, digital placemaking, digital heritage, North-East Scotland

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Introduction

Hinterland is defined in the *Cambridge English Dictionary* as an area of country that is far away from cities with an etymology derived from German, *hinter* meaning 'behind' and it was first used (as *hinderland*) in English by Chisholm (1888). This paper adopts that definition of country spaces removed from cities and large urban spaces.

Jones (1955) attempted to redefine hinterland and highlights that the logical distinctions between metropolis and hinterland are not purely geographical or economic, but also apply to the social and cultural spheres. Hinterland as a concept in tourism research has often analysed specific locations or destinations, or in terms of specific societal issues such as around second-home ownership (Back & Marjavaara, 2017). Carson, et al (2020) explore some of the wider issues and tensions in their study of Sweden, Australia, and Iceland where cities function as 'gateways' to the hinterland, but they may also act as competitors to rural destinations.

The very word 'hinterland' presupposes or implies that it lies behind something else; that it is beyond something else, and often the implication is that the 'something else' might be more important or more significant or, at the very least, more dominant in a region. This is particularly true in largely rural areas where one large town or city is pre-eminent. In the North-East of Scotland, the focus of this article, the city of Aberdeen dominates the region but sits on the coastal periphery of an expansive and very different rural hinterland. There is a sense of inter-connectedness, sometimes interdependence, between the two: Aberdeen as the urban capital and economic powerhouse, and rural Aberdeenshire and Banffshire as the cultural and spiritual hinterland. The city has been the economic driver of the region for generations, particularly through the oil and gas industries in the North Sea. It has been a magnet for employment, for higher education, and for retail and entertainment. The hinterland, however, retains a vibrant sense of identity and community, protecting and preserving its cultural heritage strongly; it is 'couthie' (a Scots word relating to a person as friendly or a place as comfortable and cosy; a rough Scottish equivalent of Danish *hygge*). Town and country, often sit juxtaposed in political outlook, in mentality, and in the depth of their sense of place and belonging but one is not merely the appendage of the other (Hoggart, 2016). For urban dwellers the hinterland is a place to 'escape to the country'; for rural dwellers the town is the place of 'bright lights' for entertainment and retail. These are, however, superficial perceptions and the distinctively different characteristics of the town and the country as places are significantly deeper and more profound than these labels suggest.

This research has been informed by thinking around the intersection of place and digital. Gazzard (2011) describes how engagement with place through media

creates new spaces and changes our relationship with spaces and places. The research was also informed and shaped by Haleboua and Polson's (2021) definition of digital placemaking as "the use of digital media to create a sense of place for oneself and/or others" (p574).

This article aims to explore issues around rural hinterlands and how different communities participate both conceptually and practically in digital placemaking to co-create narratives of rural spaces and engender a sense of place. The article is built around three case-studies examining different aspect of the representation of, and engagement with, hinterlands in the context of North-East Scotland. Ben Macdui (the second highest mountain in Scotland; 'A' on map) which is located within the region and the story of the Big Grey Man for which it is famed, Slains Castle (situated on cliffs overlooking the North Sea; 'B' on map) which is one of the inspirations for Bram Stoker's novel *Count Dracula*, and the Bow Fiddle Rock ('C' on map), a distinctive and photogenic coastal rock formation on the Moray Firth in the north of the region.

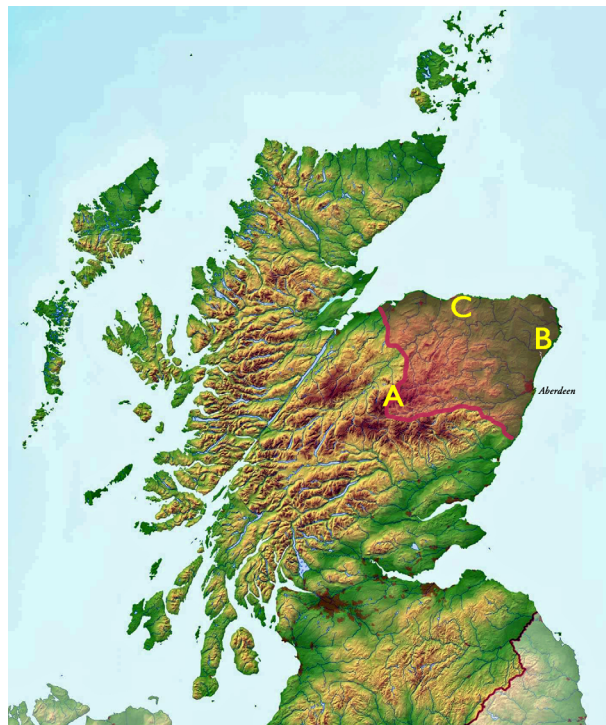


Figure 1: North-East Scotland as it is traditionally and culturally defined comprising the historic counties of Aberdeenshire, Banffshire, Kincardineshire, and Morayshire. The three examples discussed in this paper are **A** – Ben Macdui, **B** – Slains Castle, and **C** – the Bow Fiddle Rock.

The context of North-East Scotland: ‘Toonsers’ and ‘Teuchters’

North-East Scotland often feels itself overlooked being away from the concentrations of population in Scotland’s Central Belt, and because it is not on traditional tourist routes to the Highlands (Tranter, 1974). Those with passing knowledge of the region associate it with fishing and farming, and with North Sea oil. The hinterland behind Aberdeen forms a triangle of land, bordered on two sides by sea and by the Grampian Mountains on the third. The region’s culture is distinctively captured in music through Bothy Ballads and poetry in the work of Charles Murray or Flora Garry, with the latter noting:

“[Land] was a sort of religion. It was thing they lived for and thought about. It was every day that they were practising this religion. Religion ... meaning the Kirk on a Sunday was in a way a much more superficial thing than this feeling they had about the land”. – (Scots Radio, 1991/2014).

The sense of place and belonging was captured most strongly by Cuthbert Graham whose column *This is my country* in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* (1962-76) explored the North-East hinterland. His legacy is writ large for anyone attempting to understand, culturally and ethnologically, the region. Graham (1972,) captured the essence of the place, the ‘passion for the land [that] was the obsessive concern’ that marked out its identity in cultural heritage terms. He understood that the region’s distinctiveness was shaped by a shared mentality, geographical remoteness, its landscape, and its dialect.

Doric¹, a dialect of Scots, is one of the pillars of North-East life (Loester, 2017). It is widely spoken, is marked by a distinctively rich vocabulary and by, as McClure (2002, pp.21-22) describes them, certain linguistic ‘shibboleths’ setting it apart from General Scots. Doric provides one of the important characteristics germane to discussion of urban centres and rural hinterlands. Doric divides people, fairly absolutely, as being either *Toonser* (belonging to the town, and meaning Aberdeen specifically) or being *Teuchter* (a rural dweller) (Reid, 2023).

Graham (1972) and Tranter (1974) both recognise the traditional, widely-acknowledged cultural paradigm of ‘toonsers’ and ‘teuchters’. *Toonsers* have always dominated the region; the bright lights of Aberdeen as the ‘big city’ (although scarcely a big city) provide entertainment, and the economic heart of the region. *Teuchters* are seen as more unsophisticated country cousins of those in the towns. The terms are often used as an insult of the other although both rejoice in applying their own labels to themselves. These two nouns capture a

gap in the mentality, outlook and cultural diversity between town and country. Yet connections between City and the hinterland in the 'Shire' are strong. Most Teuchters look naturally to the town for certain things and feel its pull frequently. Many native-born Toonsers will tell you that their family originated in some small farming or fishing community to which they retain a connection. The idea of Town and Country together making up a whole is strong (Graham, 1972). The town of Aberdeen may dominate economically, but it is the hinterland of Aberdeenshire that enchants; a place to escape to, to lose oneself in, and to reconnect with.

Literature Review

Place and Digital Placemaking

As Cresswell (2015) observes, place is a complex, multifaceted concept. We may understand places by their locality and their geographical proximity to other places, yet we also come to see, understand, and develop a sense of place through our meaning and experience in the world. Place is, as Cresswell (2015: 18) states, as much about "epistemology as it is about ontology". As such, while we may come to know places, such as the North-East of Scotland, by their geographical boundaries, it is the social practices and processes that occur in and around these places that inform how we interpret and draw meaning from them. Pred (1984), therefore, suggests that places are unfinished, constantly 'becoming' through these processes. Massey (1994; 2005) elaborates on this, suggesting that places form out of unique sets of trajectories as bodies, objects and flows come into contact. They are forever in movement, changing and in progress (Hjorth & Pink, 2014). In a globalised world, developments in travel, technology, and capitalist production, have arguably changed how we understand place, fostering place-related uncertainty and anxiety. However, Massey (1997) offers a critical perspective on this argument, advocating for a more progressive, global perspective on place. As she determines, traditional perspectives of place are often bound to notions of rootedness, boundaries, and selective histories. Yet, as Massey (2005) explores, the social interactions and processes that make up place, reduce boundaries and facilitate multiple identities. The uniqueness of place, she argues, is not then confined to its history, rather it is reproduced and constituted through evolving social and global relations.

These relationships and processes contribute to a 'sense of place' and thus a form of placemaking. Broadly, placemaking is recognised in relation to, "how a culture group imprints its values, perceptions, memories, and traditions on a landscape and gives meaning to geographic space" (Lew, 2017: 449). However, in tourism studies, there is often a distinction made between 'placemaking' as a deliberate top-down approach to developing and promoting a sense of place. In

contrast, 'place-making' considered an organic, bottom-up approach in which the meaning of place is constructed unintentionally by communities and visitors (Lew, 2017). Studies have explored rural placemaking (and place-making) drawing upon the importance of issues such as the rural idyll (Halfacree, 2010;), rural dystopia (Rofe, 2013), identity (Csurgó & Megyesi, 2016) and the urban-rural relationship (Andersson and Jansson, 2010) to understand how rurality is constructed in a range of places. In their special issue, *Rural Media Spaces*, Andersson and Jansson (2010) explore the role of the media in representing and generating a sense of rural place. As they discuss, advances in digital media have fostered a 'do-it-yourself' culture enabling communities of people to create alternative representations of place. These place-based narratives may sit alongside wider cultural representations generated through film, music, literature, and art (Cresswell, 2004; 2015), and thus the meaning of place may develop multiple, and sometimes contested, meanings (Cresswell, 2010).

Digital placemaking, as proposed by Halegoua and Polson (2021: 574) 'describes the use of digital media to create a sense of place for oneself and/or others – to embrace digital media affordances in order to cultivate or maintain a sense of attachment to place'. Scholarship in this area has explored how people use digital platforms and location data to experience physical place (Wilken and Humphreys, 2021), develop distal relationships with place (Norum & Polson, 2021), and within the home (Ruberg & Lark, 2021). Other studies have investigated issues such as marginalisation and digital storytelling, for instance Frith and Richter (2021) explored how digital placemaking, using locative technologies, can challenge traditional and dominant narratives. These traditional narratives and traditional media - plaques, public memorials – often tell a particular and relatively narrow narrative about place (Blair, 1999). Digital media, therefore, affords opportunities for the creation of participatory counter narratives and forms of 'digital placemaking that push against dominant histories and dominant stories we tell about a place' (Frith & Richter, 2021: 697-8).

Digital media may engage people with places when they are physically present at that location and remotely. Cresswell (2021) notes, these efforts to reconfigure movement have inspired, or should inspire, reinvigorated investigations of the meaning and practice of mobility and sense of place. As Basaraba (2021) considers in her literary analysis of creative and digital placemaking studies, there are gaps in digital placemaking scholarship that has primarily focused on urban, top-down development contexts. As such, issues such as community co-creation and rurality, as well as a focus on remote forms of digital placemaking, require further attention.

Place and digital heritage

UNESCO (2003) defined digital heritage as comprising of “unique resources of human knowledge and expression created digitally, or converted into digital form”. For many years it was often primarily viewed through the lens of the digitization of pre-existing heritage content (in museums, galleries or archives). However, in the last decade particularly there has been stronger emphasis on community-based or individually-generated digital heritage, often associated with notions of the democratization of heritage. Despite this democratization, heritage can sometimes be seen, as Cresswell (2015) notes, as an “introverted obsession” (p102) where communities focus on what they want to preserve or say rather than what others, such as visitors want to see or hear. Online spaces afford opportunities for individuals to curate their own collections – pictorially in the case of this study – about particular places.

Heritage and digital heritage have strong relationship to place, one being reinforced by this process of democratization or by one of co-creation and curation of content. Purkis (2017) argued that “heritage can be situated within people’s life stories, and that these stories create a heritage identity of a local place” (p436). What Purkis highlights is worth emphasising because many recent authors have considered digital heritage primarily through the lens of it being used to connect to material things or physical locations (Hogsden & Poulter 2012; Dellios 2015). This co-created digital content possesses heritage value through the telling of stories about people, places, or events or about the visitors’ experience of them. Taylor and Gibson (2017: 408) describe this as leading to the creation of narratives which are “more polyvocal” thus further enhancing levels of democratisation of content. Purkis (2017) also addresses the importance of this digital recording and preservation as being an important part of the broader ‘digital heritage’ landscape. However, there can also be a “disconnection between increased access and increased democracy” (p. 409), a sentiment echoed by King et al. (2016) in stating that emphasis is placed on “breadth of audience and reach, rather than the quality of experience” (p. 79).

People and place are at the heart of cultural heritage, both in traditional and digital forms, although they are complex phenomena; Massey (1994) identifies social connections, relationships, and practices rather than singular representations of tradition or cultural heritage, and also, as noted previously, affords a more global sense of place. That global sense has become more profound because of the worldwide reach of digital content. Similarly, the digital heritage can – in the rush to create a platform or an app to curate content for established heritage assets or venues – overlook the rich vein of material that people, ‘ordinary’ people, create and share as a response to engaging with a place online (Liew, Goulding and Nichol, 2020). Purkis (2017) describes this digital heritage as being

about facilitating the creation of new historical content that will, in time, become a legacy for future generations. When place is valued and explored at a relatively local level it becomes the vehicle for storytelling through the lens of the person experiencing it. Online representations are therefore the crossroads where digital heritage and placemaking meet with visitors creating their own, different sense of place in the digital world (Massey, 2005). The three examples included in this article are both highly valued physical spaces but have also become the focus of new and widely-shared digital narratives.

Andersson and André (2010) acknowledge example works which explore the relationship between the media and the rural. Halfacree (2010: 259) also noted not only the contested narrative between urban and rural spaces but also that ‘media representations can play a major role in developing this context, just as they do in respect of representing rural consumption practices’. However, Basaraba (2021) acknowledges that there is a gap in scholarship that explores the connection between digital placemaking and heritage. The instances examined here are essentially examples of individuals demonstrating their own engagement with places, their co-creation of content in rural spaces, often done pictorially but also viscerally. In doing so they create new forms of heritage and shared engagement or participation through digital practice. This paper explores the communities that engage in the creation, curation and dissemination of digital heritage in the North-East Scotland hinterland, and how these participatory narratives construct a sense of place through present and distal relationships.

Methodological approaches

The research adopted a bottom-up methodological approach; that is to say, gathering and analysing ordinary user-generated comments relating to the cases, to gather the voices of those who engage with this content. The three case-studies; Ben Macdui, Slains Castle and the Bow Fiddle, were selected for three reasons (1) geographically they represent three different areas within the rural hinterland of North-East Scotland (see Figure 1) (2) they are recognised places for tourism supported and promoted by a range of online, user-generated platforms (3) each site is considered part of the heritage and identity of the North-East community. Engagement by individuals and communities within these three case-studies was examined and analysed across 67 online user-generated resources (including blogging sites, forums, review sites (including TripAdvisor), and social media platforms (including Facebook, Instagram, Flickr and Pinterest)). Comments, reactions, and engagements were initially examined by reviewing each online platform to discover which communities engaged with the content and the type of content generated. These were then categorised according to the type of community.

Data was coded according to the case study and community (see Table 1).

Case Study	Community	Data Code
Slain's Castle (18 online resources)	Travel	SC-T
	Climbing/ Walking	SC-C
	History	SC-H
	Photography	SC-Ph
	Paranormal	SC-P
Ben Macdui (47 online resources)	Artist	BM - A
	Climbing/ Walking	BM - C
	Heritage	BM - H
	Paranormal	BM - P
	Travel	BM - T
Bow Fiddle (2 online resources – Pinterest and Facebook)	Photography	BW - Ph

Table. 1. Case study resources, communities and data codes

Cross case analysis was undertaken to identify key themes and commonalities, as well as significant differences. Specifically, we were interested in examining; *who are the different communities that engage in digital placemaking at each site? How do these communities engage with the heritage and a sense of place at each site? How is a sense of place constructed through user-generated online narratives?* Differentiating features were considered in terms of the locations of the case-studies themselves, or in terms of the type of engagement demonstrated by the various types of communities, and, in some instance, with the platforms on which the content appeared. The reference numbers drawn from the analysis of online platforms are indicated with coding numbers in the text. All data examined was publicly-available, anonymized, and treated in the widely-acknowledged spirit of 'do no harm' (Laestadius, 2018) in connection with social media research.

Communities of digital placemaking in the Rural Hinterland

In the case studies we examine here, the rural hinterland of the North-East of Scotland is constructed and reimagined through engagement with storytelling across multiple forms of digital media. In their study de Souza e Silva and Frith (2014) argue that, 'when people start contributing to create the information that is attached to locations, they actively create the links among these locations...

people are then transformed from readers into writers of *urban spaces*' (2014: 45; emphasis added). Similarly, the communities that engage in participatory digital placemaking in the context of this study become curators of stories and narratives related to *rural* place. These communities differ and vary dependent on the interest and opportunity for participation that is evoked.

Ben Macdui, for instance, engages the walking community due to the mountain's notoriety as the second highest peak in Scotland. It also engages the paranormal community who express an interest in the supernatural qualities of the Big Grey Man, the heritage community who engage with the history, people and folklore, and the travel and tourism community. Each community participates in digital placemaking through the medium of blogging, forums, social media engagement and contributions to information websites. The walking and travel community share their own personal experience through narratives and photographs of their time on the mountain. These narratives are *in situ* constructing a sense of place based on the curator's perspectives, memories, and observations in the environment. Alternatively, heritage and paranormal communities take part in remote participation with digital placemaking by drawing on the heritage and stories of Ben Macdui. Regularly this involves reconstructing the narratives associated with Norman Collie's experience and other stories that appear in the book, *The Big Grey Man of Ben Macdui*, by Affleck Grey.



IMAGE 1: Ben Macdui seen from the south.
(Picture courtesy of Peter McCue)

The walking community also participate in digital placemaking at new Slains Castle² contributing their personal stories of visiting the castle while exploring local trekking routes. Likewise, the paranormal community engage in content creation related to the supernatural link to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and strange feelings evoked when visiting the abandoned castle. In contrast to Ben Macdui, Slains Castle attracts a higher proportion of the travel and photography community with a tendency to use Slains Castle as a 'bucket list' stop and place associated with its unique aesthetic characteristics (namely its abandonment and cliff edge location). Blogging and the contribution to public forums was prevalent for Slains Castle, and these communities engaged less in the curation of information-type websites. Rather digital engagement with Slains Castle tends to form part of a collection of content online (for instance, a tour of castles or photography collection). In this sense, it is comparative to the Bow Fiddle, attracting a significant tourist community who visit either by accident or because it is on their 'bucket list'. Unlike, Ben Macdui it was far less common to see second-hand narratives reconstructed and rather individuals commonly engaged with the 'feeling' and 'experience' of being present at the castle. When used, second-hand narratives were drawn upon to situate the history of the site, the connection to Bram Stoker and, on occasions, previous paranormal encounters.



IMAGE 2: Slains Castle
(Photograph: Authors).

The Bow Fiddle has gained popularity as a ‘bucket list’ and ‘must see’ site due to its aesthetic qualities. The majority of digital placemaking associated with the Bow Fiddle is through social media channels, specifically Instagram (see #bowfiddlerock). Visitors frequently use photographs to construct their personal stories about travelling to and experiencing the Bow Fiddle rock formation. The picturesque setting also attracts a keen photography community who use the place to facilitate discussion about camera equipment, light exposure, and the technical aspects of photography. Images are used in this context to construct place through the lens of the camera capturing different moods, aesthetics, and drama – which in some cases (because of factors such as weather or light, or even photographic manipulation) could look more dramatic in photos than in real life.



IMAGE 3: The Bow Fiddle Rock
(Photograph: Authors).

Frith and Richter (2021) assert that digital media is used by people to preserve memories of place-based experiences. Digital applications can be used to track our journeys, check in at places we visit and capture images and data of locations for posterity. In doing so we may choose to preserve our memory of and movement within the places we visit (Frith & Kalin, 2016). Digital media for the preservation of stories and experiences within place is evident in the content curated by communities visiting the rural hinterland of North-East Scotland. Digital technologies enable disparate communities of interest to come together, crowdsourcing information, recollections, and stories. Photos taken and shared

at the Bow Fiddle capture the memories, perceptions, and personal stories of visitors. Imagery of Bow Fiddle is not static, but ever evolving. Partly this is because physically the sea means it is ever-changing, because personal images and stories are layered on top of it, and partly because, as Pink (2016) highlights it has been reconfigured through the social, cultural and digital landscape from a rock in the sea into a 'bucket list' location. The walking communities of Ben Macdui and Slains Castle regularly capture the journey as well as the destination.

For people that visit in-person, digital placemaking in the rural hinterland is achieved by sharing personal experiences, narratives and images that tell a story and develop a sense of place from the curator's perspective. However, digital placemaking is also constructed vicariously by communities who have not visited the locality. For remote communities, a sense of the place is constructed online via second-hand narratives, re-constructing the experiences, stories, and heritage of others to inform their own digital content. Regardless of whether the content is constructed through personal experience or vicariously, a sense of place is influenced through the language, imagery and iconography that emerges from participatory digital content. Indeed, the combination of visiting and remote participation with place facilitates an ever-evolving, co-creative form of digital placemaking and digital heritage as narratives are used, and re-used, to construct a sense of place through new and evolving digital formats. As Pink (2016: 189) observes:

“Our writings and photographs never stop at the texts we present them in, but rather they will always go on new journeys with the readers who pick them up and intertwine their reading with our words and images as they move forward through the world together”.

Reimagining the Rural Hinterland

The rural hinterland of North-East Scotland is not *a* place; it is a *milieu* of physical, social, and cultural landscapes and relationships that connect communities through a sense of what it means to inhabit and visit rural place. While, geographically, the boundaries of the hinterland can be drawn it is the spaces between and within this boundary, sitting betwixt the town and country, Toonsers and Teuchters, where a sense of hinterland as place emerges. This phenomenon is not exclusive to the North-East of Scotland; it can be found in many other areas where one large conurbation dominates a remote rural community lying behind it (e.g. in North-East of England the same phenomenon is observed between the urban dwellers in Newcastle and the oft-quoted 'depths of Northumberland' the rural hinterland beyond the city (e.g. see Powe (2016)). It is also not static, but

evolving, nor is it defined by locality but rather is configured and reconfigured through the social, cultural, and digital landscape (Pink, 2016). As Gazzard (2011) observes, by engaging with place through digital media we can create new spaces and change our relationship with place. In this next section we consider how digital placemaking occurs in the rural hinterland and influences the way that places are seen, understood, and valued by communities, visitors, and wider online audiences.

Constructing a distant rural hinterland

A unique quality of the rural hinterland is its physical and social disconnect from the perceived ‘hussle and bussle’ of the urban landscape. In the case studies examined, language and imagery position these places as distanced from the urban norm. Ben Macdui is often discussed in relation to the isolated, wild, and remote landscape. A quality that is considered conducive to the supernatural *possibilities* that the place evokes.

Miles from anywhere, with a long climb to return to civilization, is the last place where you really want to spot a gigantic, hairy and hostile creature. [BM-H: 26]

The isolation of Slains Castle and its state of abandonment form a considerable part of the online narrative. Lack of tourism infrastructure and human interference are qualities regularly drawn upon to describe this as a rural place. Imagery captures the liminal spaces of Slains Castle, the empty corridors, doorways, and staircases, as well as its position isolated on the cliff edge.

There was absolutely no one around for miles and miles which made this visit all the more creepy [SC-P: 10]

“Perhaps the most beautiful part of it is that there has been no human interference for a long time, so what you see now is the toll nature has naturally taken [SC-H: 7]

“Unlike other castles in Scotland, Slains Castle in Cruden Bay has been left neglected to nature and has now been granted listed status by Historic Environment Scotland. [SC-T: 13]

Narratives and images portraying the remote, disconnected, and abandoned sense of place construct a way of seeing the rural hinterland, in the context of these places, as somewhere different and at a distance from the urban norm. These are places located away from people, disconnected from civilisation, and peripheral to what might be considered familiar and comfortable. Emptiness in this respect becomes an icon of the rural hinterland, captured in the photographs and language used to describe place, “wild”, “neglected”, “desolate”, or “lonely”. Remote is also a term that is used in many cases. This is true of Ben Macdui but untrue of both Bow Fiddle and Slains Castle. The former, although images portray it as remote, is a two-minute walk from the nearest village; and the latter is visible from the main A90 Trunk Road. Yet imagery of both is curated in such a way to create a different narrative. These stories reinforce the preconceived notions of rural in contrast to the urban and yet at the same time connect people to places across the digital landscape. Digital placemaking, therefore, reinforces a perception of the ‘distant’ rural hinterland while at the same time facilitating remote engagement and connection to a sense of place at afar (de Souza e Silva, 2006; Hjorth & Pink, 2014).

Intrepid explorers in the real and digital hinterland

In these disconnected places, the rural hinterland is constructed as a site for exploration and discovery. For many it may be an unknown, and sometimes dangerous, place. The digital curator as an explorer was a common feature in the online content examined. Like the digital wayfarers that Hjorth and Pink (2014) identify, online narratives evoked a feeling of movement through the material and digital environment of the rural hinterland. The meshing of personal and second-hand narratives positioned places in the rural hinterland as accessible only to those prepared to adventure outside the familiar and comfortable. As readers, we are invited to explore vicariously. The harsh environment of Ben Macdui and the abandoned structure of Slains are frequently recognised as potentially perilous places:

It’s not a gentle environment, and it’s way too easy to lose your way in those perilous conditions. [BM–H: 26]

Summit is usually shrouded in mist; a desolate, lonely place for intrepid mountaineers [BM–H: 26]

I clambered over the bloodless bones of Slains Castle and even made the perilous ascent up one of the stairwells to the crumbled roof line. This was probably a foolish idea and I suggest you not follow in my footsteps. There are literally no warning signs anywhere on the grounds

of Slains Castle, but it is most certainly a dangerous place to both body and mind... Take care dear traveller. [SC-T: 8]

Whichever walk you take to Slains Castle, please take care of the cliffs, which can be dangerous with their sudden and craggy drops. It is worth taking some binoculars and camera to enjoy the breathtaking views. [SC-C: 13]

Bow Fiddle is, in this respect, materially different because it lies not far from the small village of Portknockie and it is, at least from a distance, visibly accessible although requiring a short but careful walk down steep cliffs to the shore. It is, it seems, within touching distance of the shore but is in fact completely out of reach as the sea never recedes from it; the only way the rock can be touched is by canoe or kayak. It dominates the surrounding land, is the enchanting object in visitors' eyes but the rock itself can never be reached. The photographs of it therefore have a particular significance; it is always the *thing* out of reach whether the focus of a photograph or the backdrop to a selfie, it is never reached in the sense that Ben Macdui or Slains Castle can be. These elements perhaps differ from or contrast with the experiences in urban locations where things have a closer proximity coupled with an immediacy.

The enchanting and uncanny hinterland

In the digital narratives we examined, a *feeling* of place is commonly referenced in the text but also through the images displayed. These feelings are often connected to the remote and wild qualities of the landscape which counter the urban environment, and in which the natural (or potentially supernatural), not people, dominates. Scotland has always possessed a mythology of landscape. That mythology nearly always venerates remote, rural landscapes, mysterious glens, high mountains, and deep, dark lochs, essentially of hinterlands, where tales of ancestral spirits, of monsters, of giants (like the Big Grey Man of Ben Macdui) have somehow played a part shaping the natural environment. Inglis and Holmes (2003) explore these themes showing how Scotland's landscapes, cityscapes, and habitations have been interpretatively re-created over the last two centuries producing conceptions of Scottish history which privilege the mysteriousness of a Highland and Celtic past. It often downplays the presence of humankind in favour of something more ethereal.

People are enchanted and sometimes unnerved by the landscape and the stories attached to it. Lowenthal (1993) identified three factors which make landscape culturally significant: the natural environment, the use of a place for human activity, and the sense of place associated with cultural and historical values.

The nature environment of Scotland is often characterised through a romanticised lens (Gordon, 2012) which describes it as “rugged and majestic” or “harsh but beautiful”. In doing so a narrative of Highland Scotland is often superimposed as a definition for all Scottish hinterlands, although that of North-East Scotland, encompasses both the rugged remote mountains but also the wide-open spaces of gentle agricultural land.

The responses to online content particularly from those who have never visited the locations sometimes negates or misunderstands the role of Lowenthal’s second point, human activity. The inaccessible remoteness of Ben Macdui seems about as far removed from humanity as it is possible to be and those who have visited are keen to reinforce this far-from-humanity otherworldliness:

Nothing grows there save for the hardiest of plants; the summit rises from a huge sub-arctic upland, and is considered one of the wildest, most remote places left in Britain. The landscape is a featureless wave of snow and rock; between that and the omnipresent mists, it’s very easy to get lost. It’s also easy to remember how very old those peaks are—almost as old as the lore about them. [BM-P: 29]

Similarly, the abandonment and dereliction of Slains Castle is sometimes interpreted as the triumph of something otherworldly over human activity.

It [Slains] is empty, you know that and I know that, but deep down it feels like it isn’t. You get this sense that something is watching you leave and that dreaded sense of foreboding loneliness setting back in. Maybe I am being overly sensitive, I don’t know, but it is a real feeling that even now as I write this in bed, I get goosebumps [sic] and the hairs stand on end. [SC-P: 10]

Yet all of these involve human activity to form and shape digital placemaking, whether the hands that built the abandoned structure of Slains Castle, or those that took the digital image on the summit of Ben Macdui. Many of the responses to digital content exhibit a sense of what the Germans describe as *fernweh* (the aching or longing to travel to far-off places that will, perhaps, never be visited) and a constituency of online followers respond to this ethereal, sometimes uncanny, enchantment when they see these places digitally.

At Slains Castle, in addition to observations about the physical danger of the place, feelings of discomfort, eeriness or foreboding are foregrounded in the site’s location, its connection to Dracula and its supernatural or otherworldly potential.

Indeed, the eerie sense of place is often linked back to Bram Stoker and the likelihood of the castle being his inspiration for the novel:

As with any old building, there are, of course, rumours of a Slains Castle Ghost. Either sightings of the 20th Earl of Erroll³ or sometimes its soldiers. The building definitely has an eery [sic] feeling about it, you may even see a murder of crows which adds to the creepy atmosphere and plays on those Gothic, haunting vibes. [SC-T: 12]

As many ruined places, Slains has its own ghost stories, and it's not one of the best attractions on the Aberdeenshire coastal trail which makes it even more spooky standing alone on the edge of the hill. [SC-T: 16]

This really is a haunting place. Perhaps that's why Bram Stoker purportedly used Slains Castle as inspiration for Dracula. Mr. Stoker spent quite some time at nearby Cruden Bay and travelled to Slains Castle to...clear his mind? Unlikely. Perhaps the bad juju of the place filled him with horrors he could only expunge with quill and ink. [SC-T: 8]

This sense of foreboding is further referenced in digital content related to Ben Macdui where second-hand narratives draw upon the experience of climbers who have encountered the Big Grey Man.

Most, if not all, reported an uncontrollable fear and sense of dread—indeed, many of reports of the Am Fear Liath Mor are not sightings so much as they are sensations: sudden, categorical despair; panic at a sound from off in the mists. Some felt themselves drawn to the cliffs, and had to fight the urge to hurtle themselves off, others nearly slipped and fell to their death by accident as they scampered to escape the crunch of a heavy footstep. [BM-P: 29]

Moreover, other mountaineers began to confess that they too had experienced similar sensations of uncontrollable fear and panic with no rational reason while on Ben Macdui and had come away with the vivid impression that a malevolent, paranormal presence existed here, which sought to frighten away anyone venturing upon this lonely, desolate peak [BM-P: 41]

Others refer to their personal experiences of the place and its potential to evoke an uncontrollable sense of fear and discomfort.

While I must admit that I've never seen the Grey Man, I've been on Ben Macdui when the mist came down, and I can assure you that, with or without any Grey Men, when that happens it's a profoundly spooky place! Anybody up there on their own would automatically feel a chill down their spine, and anything which might make you think something was following you would be a hundred times more believable than usual. And the acoustics get very odd indeed. [BM – C: 39]

In contrast to these examples which draw upon locations situated in supernatural folklore, the digital content produced for Bow Fiddle enchants through the imagery and narratives that are evoked. Unlike, Ben Macdui and Slains Castle there are no stories or folklore attached to the Bow Fiddle. Instead, the feeling of the place is constructed from the photographs and narratives uploaded on social media and review sites which regularly describe the site as 'unique', 'beautiful' and 'spectacular'. Images capture the natural beauty of the site and its perceived remote locality; the rock formation is predominantly photographed on its own showing its secluded position or featuring visitors standing on the rocky outcrops at the foot of the shore. It is the awe-inspiring qualities of the Bow Fiddle as a place, perpetuated through digital media, that has popularised it as a visitor location. The images disseminated of Bow Fiddle over the last fifteen years have transformed it from, essentially, just a thing that locals knew of, to an embodiment of the rugged and romantic (and often idealised) image of Scotland; in doing so it has become a new form of heritage.

I find myself drawn to the rock almost every day taking photos in all kinds of light at all hours of the day. Never tire of looking at it. [BF-Ph: 6]

Absolutely magical!!! Beautiful spot and not to be missed [BF-Ph: 14]

Halegoua and Polson (2021: 574) speak about digital media affording the opportunity 'to create a sense of place for oneself and/or others'. The examples here support this assertion but also lend credence to Purkis's (2017) notion that digital content of this kind created a new form of heritage, one that is essentially democratized and open to everyone to engage with.

Conclusion

The case-studies we use in this article help explore the ways in which images, iconography and language shape and inform perceptions of the rural space in the digital environment. This is essentially a 'bottom-up' approach to placemaking in rural areas which helps to shape the way that places in the rural hinterland are seen, understood, and valued by communities, (including those who physically visit and those who engage only vicariously through a screen). Purkis (2017), Taylor and Gibson (2017) and others speak of the democratisation of heritage through digital platforms. This is evident in this 'bottom-up' approach; people can 'pick' and 'choose' how they want to 'see' the rural hinterland and the places within it. For one group it may be abandoned, desolate and eerie; for another it may be beautiful, enchanting, and inspiring; for some it may be both. Participatory digital placemaking creates layers of narratives and 'ways of seeing' place that are added too and reimagined by those that visit place, and those that draw upon these narratives to construct their own interpretations. The narrative is not just created by people who have visited these places but multiple communities including tourists, but also those interested in heritage, photography, storytelling, the paranormal and many other facets. They engage in different ways to create new multi-voiced narratives and perspectives that are distinct for visitors in the real, and online world (Massey 2005). In this sense, these communities participate in the 'do-it-yourself' construction of place observed by Andersson and Jansson (2010). To achieve this, communities draw upon wider cultural narratives (such as the Bram Stoker connection at Slains and folklore of Ben MacDhui) (Cresswell, 2004; 2015), and personal experience, to reinforce and re-create meaning for place in the rural hinterland (Cresswell, 2010).

As Gazzard (2011) observes, the presentation of content on digital platforms and our engagement with it can change and shape relationships with place. In these examples, digital media constructs and reinforces certain common 'icons' of the hinterland. These can include, inter alia, ideas of emptiness, remoteness, enchantment, or abandonment. It also facilitates the creation of 'new' relationships between people and place. Ben Macdui becomes a place for paranormal communities to engage in discussions about the supernatural possibility of place, as well as being a traditional location for hillwalkers; Bow Fiddle becomes a place for photographers to discuss the aesthetics and technical specifications of their craft, as well as being a 'bucket list' beauty spot for tourist. This reimagining in the digital sphere involves people who never visit the locations but perhaps exhibit that sense of *fernweh* through their liking, commenting on, sharing of online content. Arguably, these online interactions contribute to the evolving landscape of social and global processes that Massey (2005) identifies as integral to the identity and meaning of place. Perceptions of the rural hinterland as a place are not confined

to its history, neither are they formed exclusively by those that inhabit or visit it, rather its' meaning evolves, fragments, and multiplies through the creation of new forms of digital storytelling, heritage, and media.

The cases examined here demonstrate, in their digital existence, exaggerated notions of rural hinterland that sits paradoxically given their relatively close proximity to the urban centre that is Aberdeen. Yet, the Toonsers of the city would unblinkingly regard them as far-away haunts of the Teuchters. Stereotypes which it is perhaps imagined digital platforms would help overcome are, often reinforced. There is, for example, an exaggerated romanticising of rural hinterland, and this is evident in all three of the cases examined here. The exaggeration of the romance of the place and the stories behind (or the case of Bow Fiddle of its dramatic appeal) is common on all online platforms and through all types of communities engaging with the content. Yet the aftermath of the Covid 19 lockdowns which limited people's ability to travel has resulted in many of the Toonsers being much more aware of what is on their doorstep and that it is not perhaps 'too far' or 'too remote' for them to engage with. This has perhaps been facilitated by the extensive digital content about the North-East hinterland.

This complexity is seen through the digital narratives, images and iconography that exaggerate places as 'remote' (when really it is quite connected, as is the case across North-East Scotland), or 'deeply uncanny' (when it is actually quite ordinary or mundane). In the geographical context of this study, this is perhaps unsurprising as it is the rural areas of North-East (rather than the town) where the spirit and cultural soul dwells whether in the expansive literature and poetry of the Doric dialect or in Bothy Ballads and other traditions that emerged from farming and fishing communities. As Halfacree (2010) notes, media representations can play a significant role in representing rurality. In the digital environments examined in this study, exaggerated versions of the rural hinterland are kept alive by multiple voices that co-create and re-imagine place through visual and written media – and people come to see and value it as such. Digital heritage, as noted above, comes in many forms. The examples explored in this article, are one which speak of re-interpretation and dissemination, as well as democratization, crowdsourcing, and participatory engagement. Purkis (2017: 436) speaks of digital heritage being “situated within people's life stories, and that these stories create a heritage identity of a local place”. The examples of Ben Macdui, Slains Castle and the Bow Fiddle are of co-created and co-curated digital heritage which present multiple voices and identities, but all speak to that strong sense of connection to place.

This paper has aimed to contribute to a growing body of scholarship that recognises the role of digital placemaking for rural communities (see Special Issue by Andersson and Jansson, 2010) and the requirement for further research into bottom-up, community-focused practices (Basaraba, 2021) and remote forms

of participation with place (Cresswell, 2021). The lens of the rural hinterland provided an opportunity to examine which communities engage with digital placemaking in the North-East of Scotland, and how these practices reinforce pre-existing understandings of rurality and hinterland, while also presenting new and evolving narratives. There are limitations to this study. Geographically, the context of the study focuses on a specific area of Scotland and only three-case specific studies were selected by the researchers. It is possible that different digital placemaking practices would present themselves if the geographical context and scope of the study was expanded. As such, a fuller understanding of how user-generated digital content contributes to placemaking in the rural hinterland would be provided by applying the methodological principles of this study to a broader context. However, the initial findings of this study demonstrate the value of investigating online user-generated content and how it is produced by different communities as a form of digital placemaking in rural environments. For the North-East of Scotland, this form of participatory digital placemaking by visiting, and remote, individuals counteract the urban norm and connects communities across town and country through a reimagined digital hinterland.

Authors

Rachael Ironside, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the School of Creative and Cultural Business at Robert Gordon University, Scotland, UK. Her research interests focus on the role of supernatural folklore, and how it impacts our experience and understanding of place and cultural heritage.

Peter Reid is Professor in the School of Creative and Cultural Business at Robert Gordon University, Scotland, UK. Much of his work is focused around the galleries, libraries, archives, and museum (GLAM) sector and around cultural heritage, particularly the indigenous, intangible heritage of the North and North-East of Scotland.

Endnotes

1 The term ‘Doric’ implying rustic or unsophisticated was used to describe dialects in Scotland more generally. In the last one hundred years however, and particularly since the 1970s, it has come to be used specifically to refer to the version of Scots spoken in the North-East of Scotland.

2 The ‘new’ Slains Castle (a nineteenth century building that is now in ruins) replaced a much older medieval structure of which little remains. This older castle is located to the south of the one discussed in this article.

3 The Earls of Erroll were the owners of Slains Castle; the 20th Earl mentioned died in 1927.

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