THE ROYAL WELSH SHOW: FACILITATING RURAL BUZZ

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural shows are significant events for rural communities. Using the case study of the Royal Welsh Show, the largest event of its kind in Europe, this paper argues that agricultural shows can be seen as temporary knowledge clusters. By bringing together key rural actors, agricultural shows create temporary spaces for presentation and interaction between suppliers, producers and consumers, leading to distinct vertical and horizontal forms of knowledge exchange. Discussions take place between farmers, government and suppliers, creating trust and allowing for knowledge exchange to take place. At the same time, farmers can view and compare their stock and farming practices with that of other farmers, sharing best practice and allowing for new ideas to emerge and gain prominence in the agricultural industry. This interaction between different groups at agricultural shows creates a rural buzz, helping to maintain rural relations year round, eventually forming a community of practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Recently regional studies has turned to explore temporary knowledge clusters (Maskell, Bathelt, & Malmberg, 2006; Torre, 2008) focusing on urban centres as innovation and growth drivers (Ward & Brown, 2009). This suggests that knowledge-based clustering does not occur in rural areas; nevertheless, despite relatively low density of economic activity compared with urban places, rural areas can be sites of intense knowledge exchange, particularly around agriculture (Goulet, 2013). This paper explores how intense knowledge-exchange systems function in rural areas by looking at agricultural shows as ‘temporary knowledge clusters’. By providing meeting points for rural actors, potential partners acquire proximity facilitating knowledge exchange. This event-based temporary proximity and agglomeration allows innovative ideas to diffuse throughout rural areas; knowledge exchange is not confined to the event itself, a phenomenon here conceptualized as ‘rural buzz’ (after Bathelt, Malmberg, & Maskell’s, 2004, global buzz concept).

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Like global buzz, ‘rural buzz’ regards a range of mechanisms of interactive learning and observation as part of the information and communication ecology of temporary events (Fitjar & Huber, 2014). Rural buzz via agricultural shows facilitates knowledge exchange through face-to-face contact, temporary co-presence and co-location of key rural actors, allowing this information to spread throughout rural areas. Using a mixed-methods case study of the Royal Welsh Show (RWS), Europe’s largest event of its kind, this paper asks the research question: Do theories of knowledge-based clustering have salience for rural areas? To answer this, a model for rural buzz is proposed detailing how temporary events can create rural buzz. This model, in turn, is relevant for wider debates surrounding rural knowledge exchange mechanisms and the impacts of temporary events.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much current work on knowledge exchange has specifically an urban focus, making assumptions that may not hold true for rural areas. Knowledge exchange and innovation result from actors with different types of knowledge and competencies coming together and exchanging information (Bathelt et al., 2004). Despite increasing use of virtual spaces for knowledge creation, and arguments that the need for geographical proximity for knowledge exchange has subsided, physical places remain important as sites for knowledge exchange, particularly related to the building of trust and for tacit knowledge exchange (Townsend, Wallace, Smart, & Norman, 2014). Only in the same local environment and meeting repeatedly in person (building trust) can more subtle forms of information be exchanged (Bathelt & Turi, 2011).

Rural areas are characterized by a multifaceted innovation- and knowledge-exchange process, involving many different actors. The typical agricultural knowledge-exchange system contains organizations and individuals regularly interacting around creating, sharing and using different types of knowledge in order to support innovation and rural development (Lane & Oreszczyn, 2013). For members of rural communities where work is often isolating, and technology unreliable, face-to-face interaction remains important. The coming together of actors at temporary events thus offers opportunities for this interaction, and can seen as a temporary cluster, potentially facilitating knowledge exchange processes (Lane & Oreszczyn, 2013).

Temporary clusters support processes of interactive learning, knowledge creation and the development of international networks (Bathelt & Schuldt, 2008). They tend to be multi-dimensional, characterized by both vertical and horizontal interactions. Vertical interaction relates to supplier–customer relations, enabling information exchange about market trends, and possible future requirements. Horizontal interaction occurs between organizations that are also competitors, bringing opportunities for competing organizations to observe each other’s practices, share knowledge and encouraging collaboration antecedent to innovation (Bathelt & Schuldt, 2008).

The coming together of actors within a temporary cluster leads to the creation of what Bathelt et al. (2004, p. 38) define as buzz: ‘the information and communication ecology created by face-to-face contacts, co-presence and the co-location of people and firms within the same industry and place or region’.

To participate in buzz and receive useful information, actors do not need to make any capital or social investment beyond being located geographically within the cluster area (Gertler, 1995). Despite benefiting from regional buzz, actors must make specific personal investments in the knowledge cluster to benefit from its web of knowledge (Grabher, 2002). To date, buzz has primarily been discussed in terms of urban areas, suggesting that buzz currently derives from two main sources:
• Local buzz, for those located within close mutual proximity, facilitating the generation of a variety of innovation and collaboration opportunities.
• Global buzz draws in a wider international audience, enabling global connections to be made and new opportunities to be opened up (Bathelt et al., 2004).

But the rural manifestation of buzz has to date been neglected by the literature. Therefore, this paper asks the question: Can the importance of rural temporary events, such as agricultural shows, be understood as acting as a form of rural temporary cluster that facilitate rural buzz?

The Royal Welsh Show

The RWS was established in 1904 in order to assist, promote and improve Welsh agriculture and today it is seen as an important social, business and political occasion for rural Wales. The RWS houses displays and exhibitions relating to agriculture, forestry, horticulture and the environment, with a mass appeal demonstrated in 39% of visitors having no immediate connection with agriculture. The 2014 event attracted 237,694, visitors,\(^1\) with 1033 RWS traders present, from multinational organizations to artisan Welsh food businesses. The show remains primarily an agricultural event with the 2014 show attracting 7959 competitive livestock entries (animals competing to be crowned best in breed, which increases their resale price and progeny value), including the largest exhibition of sheep and Welsh ponies and cobs to be seen in the world.

The study, undertaken in July 2014, involved both extensive visitor (1027 responses) and trader (295 responses) surveys, establishing basic demographic data, visitor motivations and satisfaction with the event. Throughout 2014 and 2015, 40 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with Royal Welsh Agricultural Society stakeholders. The questionnaire data drawn upon in this paper were analysed using Microsoft Excel and interviews coded and analysed using NVivo 11.

For many, attending the RWS is an annual pilgrimage; it is seen as the event for the farming industry in Wales and something that must not be missed:

‘It is engrained isn’t it? My parents and grandparents have always gone. If I don’t go, I feel left out. It is our industry’s event’. (interview, Wales Young Farmers Club Member)

People attend the RWS for many reasons: it is highly social, allowing visitors to conduct business in a relaxing and informal manner (Table 1).

| Table 1. Reason for attending the Royal Welsh Show (RWS) \(n = 1027\). |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| **Reason** | **Respondents (%)** |
| Day out | 46 |
| Family holiday | 17 |
| Business | 15 |
| Competitor | 8 |
| Family competing | 5 |
| Education | 5 |
| Trader | 2 |
| Other | 2 |
The Welsh Government views the RWS as a ‘signature showcase event for Wales’ (Welsh Government, 2010), further emphasizing its national significance, one official remarking:

The Royal Welsh is not just an agriculture event … you almost get the same feeling when you go to the Royal Welsh as when you go to the Millennium Stadium for a Wales v England game … it is one of those major events on the Welsh calendar. (interview, Welsh Government representative 1)
This significance sees visitors travel to the RWS from across Britain (Figure 1): combined with international media coverage and a general public, the show’s ‘web of influence’ can spread throughout Wales and beyond.

**A TEMPORARY CLUSTER?**

The RWS provides the agricultural industry a rare opportunity to come together to celebrate its industry throughout the four days of the show, where there are opportunities for both formal and informal knowledge exchange. Firstly, many large organizations operating in rural Wales hold receptions at the RWS, allowing often isolated farmers to meet with other industry actors and share the latest agricultural innovations. This meeting of rural actors and its resultant ‘proximity’ allows contacts to be made and vertical knowledge exchanged (Rychen & Zimmermann, 2008):

Innovis [a local sheep breeding technology firm] does a cheese and wine evening, and that is very informal talk where everyone hears what problems they’ve got; what good things are happening. … It is just handy for farmers to talk to other farmers, because where else would they get that opportunity. We don’t. (interview, farmer 1)

Secondly, the show’s social nature allows farmers to speak with other farmers (horizontal knowledge exchange); this often involves viewing and commenting on livestock entries or the latest mechanical innovations. These conversations’ informal nature allows reciprocal knowledge exchange, with farmers willing to share information with both other farmers and general public alike, without expecting anything in return. This informal knowledge exchange process is often not linked by farmers with enhancing their own business practices:

It is learning by osmosis at the Royal Welsh, you don’t even know that you are learning sometimes, because it is a chat and you see something that you like and you know you go and you say ‘why’d you do that?’ (interview, Farmers Union of Wales representative 1)

The learning at RWS is a byproduct of the farmer having a fun day out: the primary reason for people visiting the show is for a day out or holiday, but one where they can gain new knowledge, influencing their business practices often many months after the event (Table 1):

I know of locally where what people have learnt at the Royal Welsh have influenced some changes, and have led to people changing their farming practices. Every farmer who goes to the Royal Welsh will pick something up, just by going to the show and picking up leaflets and information from the stands, looking at new machinery and things. (interview, Farming Connect)

Farmers typically share best practice though discussions and informal meetings with trusted actors (Fisher, 2013): relationships developed at the RWS facilitate social learning processes: ‘Getting a so called expert to tell farmers how to do things is not the way to get a farmer to do something. You need a fellow farmer, who is able to speak to their fellow farmers’ (interview, Welsh Assembly Member).

Thirdly, the show brings together key agricultural actors who otherwise do not regularly communicate, thus facilitating knowledge-exchange relationships. Therefore, the RWS can be regarded as facilitating a temporary cluster with RWS visitors hard pressed to ignore the agricultural web of knowledge there: even the most passive of visitors (who do not actively pursue knowledge exchange) take something home. In the period following the show, businesses get many enquiries, sometimes resulting in sales many months after the event.
RURAL BUZZ: A MODEL

This face-to-face contact and temporary co-presence of rural actors allows trust to be established and knowledge to be exchanged (Townsend et al., 2014). There are multiple levels of knowledge exchange between rural actors present at the RWS. No personal investments need be made to benefit: it is enough to be there, being immersed in the temporary cluster, surrounded by the agriculture industry, to hear gossip, opinions and recommendations. The knowledge exchange is both planned and unplanned, allowing those involved to increase their understanding and knowledge of the latest agricultural innovations, stimulating and driving forward rural areas.

The RWS acts to initiate productive relationships between agricultural actors that are not geographically bounded. The public and the media (22% of people who watched coverage of the 2015 event were based outside the UK) present at the RWS enable this buzz to spread throughout Britain, in turn generating more buzz, helping to drive forward rural areas.

The RWS provides an informal platform for organizations to share knowledge and innovations, and an arena for rural people to communicate, which leads to subconscious learning, and opportunities for collaboration. The coming together of different actors at the RWS makes it important for both formal and informal learning within Wales, for farmers, businesses and policy-makers. Over time these interactions enable strong, trusting and often personal relationships to develop, meaning that detailed information can be exchanged, enabling complex information flows. These characteristics mean that the RWS can be understood as a temporary cluster.

The knowledge-exchange mechanism at the RWS persists beyond the event’s four days, something this paper proposes as being rural buzz. This allows the RWS to become a centre for knowledge production and a catalyst for rural development within Wales. Figure 2 integrates the elements identified here into a first-cut model for rural buzz (see Table 2 for more detail on individual processes).

Figure 2. Simplified model of the rural buzz at the Royal Welsh Show (RWS).
Note: 1, interaction between farmers; 2, interaction between different agricultural suppliers/service providers; 3, interaction between the Welsh government and farmers; 4, interaction between knowledge transfer specialists; and 5, spread of knowledge throughout the community and beyond.
| Element | Rural buzz dimension | Empirical evidence from the Royal Welsh Show (RWS) | Underlying concept |
|---------|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1       | Interaction between farmers | General interaction between farmers on an informal/conversational level whilst viewing competitions and tradestands | - Horizontal (but informal) knowledge exchange |
|         |                      |                                                  |                   |
| 2       | Interaction between agricultural suppliers/service providers | Temporary co-presence allows businesses to come together, bringing the opportunity to observe, communicate and collaborate with each other. Although some of these businesses may be urban based, they are operating within a rural realm, further contributing to the rural buzz | - Horizontal knowledge exchange  
- Temporary clustering |
| 3       | Interaction between farmers and government | Government presence at events encourages trust, and fosters communication between different rural actors. This allows farmers to express their views to government and to influence policy | - Vertical knowledge exchange  
- Temporary clustering |
| 4       | Interaction between knowledge transfer facilitators and farmers | Through various outreach points and exhibitions, knowledge transfer specialists can give information on the latest agricultural innovations, training courses and support available | - Vertical knowledge exchange  
- Temporary clustering |
| 5       | Knowledge spreading | Due to the presence of the media, general public and the significance of the event, the knowledge created can spread throughout the region. The buzz spreading and the maintenance of the relationships created create trust, which over time enables complex information flows and rural transformation | - Trust  
- Buzz |
CONCLUSIONS

This paper has demonstrated the role that agricultural shows have in knowledge exchange in rural areas. The observation and interaction that occurs at these events facilitates informal learning, helping to stimulate knowledge exchange, and can lead to innovation; that it happens in a short-lived and intensified form means these events represent a temporary cluster. The data presented suggest that large-scale rural events could be seen as a temporary cluster in rural setting, with the main knowledge exchange mechanisms being set out in Table 2.

The rural buzz model comprises five main knowledge-exchange elements, which coalesce into a temporary project which then spreads throughout its host community. Through the event enabling temporary proximity, and leading to the formation of rural buzz, tacit knowledge exchange and situational learning can be facilitated.

The model proposed by this paper is not definitive, but rather exploratory and suggestive. It can be applied to any occasion where large numbers of groups/individuals come together in rural areas, be it an agricultural show, a trade event or demonstration day. It is the relationships facilitated by the event, which persist beyond the event itself, that create the buzz and support rural innovation.

The rural buzz created as a result of temporary clusters at large-scale rural events suggests that they might become centres for knowledge production and catalysts for rural development, highlighting the conditions under which knowledge-based clustering can have salience for rural areas.

This paper took a single case study and therefore the rural buzz model requires a more general testing, refinement and validation. Were similar findings to be found for other case studies, it would raise interesting implications for the way that regional studies considers knowledge transfer and clustering.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTE

1. For comparison, the other four-day agricultural shows in the UK, the Royal Highland Show and the Royal Bath and West Show, attracted 188,449 and 132,000 visitors respectively.

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