

## Performing Rurality in Online Community Groups\*

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**ABSTRACT** In this paper, we investigate how rurality is performed in online community groups, attending in particular to outdoor recreation and engagement with local nature. The starting point for our performative approach is that when places are digitally mediated, the technological intermediary is never innocent or neutral. Methodologically, we conducted an online ethnography in 20 rural community groups on Facebook during one full year, collecting every post and associated comment threads relating to outdoor recreation and other forms of engagement with local nature. An iterative, heuristic coding process was employed to engage with and further develop existing performative approaches to the sociological study of rural places. Distinguishing throughout between *staged* and *quotidian* performances, our findings detail how the *routines*, *pleasures*, and *tasks* of everyday rural life are performed online. Important distinctions that emerge from this include routines that are *given* vis-à-vis those that are *in-the-making*; pleasures based on *impression* and *expression* respectively; and tasks relating to *carework* and *sharework*. The paper contributes valuable new insights regarding the performance of rurality in the age of the everyday Internet.

### Introduction

Over the past few decades, the Internet and its myriad associated technologies have been folded into everyday life. It has become an *everyday Internet* (Hine 2015) which is deeply ingrained in lived experience and social relations, regardless of the frequency and intensity with which individuals make use of it—even non-users do not escape the effects of its presence. Rural areas have not been exempted from this development,

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and Internet-based technologies have found a place of their own in the technosocial configurations that underpin rural sociability (Johansen and Fisker 2020). With the gradual arrival of the everyday Internet, rural places are increasingly being performed online with the implication that the production of rural space is being inflected by the introduction of online modes of communication and social interaction, not least through the rise of social media as a vehicle for on-screen sociability (Schroeder 2016). This is bound to have profound implications for rural sociology, but our knowledge is currently limited; a situation that we take modest steps to remedy in this paper.

Intertwined processes of globalization, urbanization, and increased mobility have been shown to shift the balance between place-based and selective community attachment towards the latter, without thereby obliterating place-based belonging or local communities (e.g., Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst 2005). Instead, place-based engagement itself has become more selective (Gieling et al. 2019) while the combination of increased mobility and new communication technologies has engendered a novel kind of “place elasticity” which “allows individuals to live in distant locales while maintaining close interaction with a particular place” (Barcus and Brunn 2010:281). This is reflected in place-based community groups on social media platforms which have emerged over the past two decades as a new means of social interaction among groups of rural dwellers who share an attachment to the same place.

Research on online sociability has highlighted and problematized the algorithmic power that social media platforms wield over their users, for instance in automatically individualizing news feeds (Beer 2017; Bucher 2012). Other studies have documented a tendency towards online echo chambers, where selective attachments funnel users into tribes of like-minded people, precluding experiences of diversity, difference, and (ant)agonistic encounter (Batorski and Grzywinska 2018). Online rural community groups have to be seen within this context, but it is an open question whether there is leeway for them to bypass such tendencies, and if so, whether they actually do. As pointed out by Velkova and Kaun (2021:523) “little has been said about the possibilities of users to resist algorithmic power.”

In previous research, we have shown how social media technology has been folded into the pre-existing technosocial configurations of rural places, where it intermingles with face-to-face encounters, mail-delivered leaflets and weekly newspapers, physical posters at key meeting places, and other mundane technologies for rural sociability (Johansen and Fisker 2020). These findings have to be considered alongside related research at the intersection of social media and rural place, shedding

new light on the relation between social cohesion and social media use in villages (Wallace et al. 2017); online building and maintenance of social capital in rural communities (Tiwari, Lane, and Alam 2019); rural politics conducted through social media (Golding and Brannon 2020; Lundgren and Johansson 2017; Lundgren and Liliequist 2020); digitally extended place-making by rural youth (Waite 2020; Waite and Bourke 2015); the use of social media and digital environments among LGBTQ people in rural areas (Liliequist 2020); online representations of the countryside in the tourism industry (Zhou 2014); and the mediatization of the rural-urban divide (Jansson 2013; Jansson and Andersson 2012). In this paper, we seek to complement this growing body of knowledge by studying the role of place-based Facebook groups in rural dwellers' outdoor activities and their engagement with local natures and landscapes, which make up a key part of their everyday life.

### **The Online Performance of Rural Places**

Our starting point is that when places are digitally mediated, the technological intermediary is never innocent or neutral. Hine's (2015) notion of the Internet as embedded, embodied, and everyday is instructive in this regard. She emphasizes that the Internet, as a target for inquiry, "is *embedded* in various contextualizing frameworks, institutions, and devices, that the experience of using it is *embodied* and hence highly personal and that it is *everyday*, often treated as an unremarkable and mundane infrastructure" (Hine 2015:32). In this latter sense, it has joined the ranks of other mundane technologies (Michael 2000) which are rarely remarked or consciously thought about but nevertheless comprise key conditioners of everyday life and its associated practices. The sovereign human subject never really appears in this account in that its agency is always already bound up with the affordances of prevailing technosocial configurations. Casey (1997:337) asserted that the event of place not only locates but *situates*—with "location" referring to geographical coordinates and "situation" referring to a more complex relational ensemble which is not only spaced but also timed (i.e., a spatio-temporal conjuncture). The online places of the everyday Internet are special in this regard, because while they do situate, they lack location in any meaningful sense. Rather, they continually attach themselves to locations to engender situated events which intermingle in very real ways with the places encountered at those locations.

The mundane technologies perspective is closely aligned with the posthuman outlook that Duggan and Peeren (2020:8) used to assert that the rural "is a *common* place (...) in that it is shared, by humans and non-humans in a communality that is always in the process of being

articulated differentially.” What we want to add is that a recognition of posthuman—or more-than-human (e.g., Joks, Østomo, and Law 2020)—agency includes not only the fact that rural places are inhabited and produced by a diversity of materials, plants and animals—including humans—but also that performative practices themselves are constituted by a posthuman agency that includes the technological assemblages which make up (trans)local technosocial configurations. Being online and virtual is not the same as being disembodied, place-less, or unreal. A posthuman outlook, however, should not entail a disregard for human agency which is indeed our primary empirical focus point in this paper.

What we set out to explore is how the rise of the everyday Internet may have altered the conditions for understanding how rurality is performed. In an influential piece on performing rurality (cf. Woods 2010), Edensor (2006:484) used the theatrical metaphor of *staging* to explain how “different ‘natural’ stages accommodate performances and are (re) produced by them.” The stages he had in mind included “village greens, farm-life centers, heritage attractions, grouse moors, mountains, long-distance footpaths and farmyards” (ibid.), but they did not include the virtual “places” of the everyday Internet which have arguably become just as important today. Still, Edensor’s assertion that “stages might be carefully managed, and enactions can be tightly choreographed or closely directed” continues to ring true, as does the observation that “performances might be scrutinized by fellow performers to minimize any divergences from conventions” (Edensor, 2006:484). Often, however, everyday performances are less tightly controlled: “quotidian performances that tether people to place, producing serial sensations via daily tasks, pleasures and routines” (Edensor 2006:491).

When turning attention to *online* stages, we may expect to rediscover the full range of performances—from the scripted, directed, and choreographed to the improvised, sedimented, and everyday. But we may also expect them to be differently configured and to appear in new constellations of alignment vis-à-vis other rural performances. For a start, the everyday Internet has entailed a stretching of place (Waite 2020) and a renewed prominence of translocal relations (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013; Tenhunen 2011). Such elasticity is not entirely new but rather reflects a digital accentuation of long-standing practices whereby social relations simultaneously stretch and compress our sense of geographical proximity, drawing distant places near while keeping others at a distance, notwithstanding the relative geographic location of those places. Indeed, the constitutive role of social relations in the making of place has long been recognized as such in relational geography (e.g., Massey 2005).

**Table 1. Total number of posts analyzed, number of groups, and membership range per area**

Area	Posts	Groups	Members	Area	Posts	Groups	Members
NWJ-1	20	1	216	EJ-1	54	5	33–514
NWJ-2	27	2	47–228	EJ-2	91	2	305–1,036
NWJ-3	51	2	287–313	EJ-3	16	1	138
NWJ-4	28	3	231–274	EJ-4	17	1	205
NWJ-5	15	1	672	EJ-5	52	1	535
NWZ-1	167	1	1,820	SZ-1	112	1	851
NWZ-2	27	1	5,078	SZ-2	19	1	384
NWZ-3	66	1	2,673	SZ-3	4	1	185
NWZ-4	1	1	463	SZ-4	23	1	237
NWZ-5	11	1	388	SZ-5	45	1	348

### Methods and Material

Our empirical material consists of posts in place-based, publicly available Facebook groups and pages<sup>1</sup> from 20 rural communities in five different areas across Denmark, collected during one full year from the beginning of May 2019 to the end of April 2020. We know from previous research that this social media platform is among the most frequently used mundane technologies for sociability in Danish rural communities (Johansen and Fisker 2020) in a country which, moreover, has a high degree of Internet connectivity. Membership numbers varied from 33 to 5,078, but most had between 100 and 500 members—a variation largely seen to be proportional with variations in the population covered. Those with high membership numbers were invariably located in areas with an abundance of second homes, especially in North West Zealand. In the text the 20 communities are anonymized as follows: North West Jutland (NWJ 1-5), East Jutland (EJ 1-5), North West Zealand (NWZ 1-5), and South Zealand (SZ 1-5). The purpose of the selection was not to compare findings between communities but to provide a heterogeneous cross-section of rural communities across the country. Further details about the size and distribution of the empirical material are given in Table 1. Groups were typically open for anyone to join but targeted people who either lived locally or had a close connection to the area. During the study period, all posts

<sup>1</sup>“Groups” and “pages” are different functions on the platform, but both were seen to be in use as online community spaces. Some communities had both while others had only one or the other.

and associated comments relating to local nature and outdoor activities were archived and prepared for coding and analysis. This focus reflects the fact that the material was collected as part of a larger research project on outdoor recreation and engagement with local natures and landscapes in the Danish countryside. The thematic focus, however, is also relevant to the study of rural places in general as closeness to nature has so often been highlighted as a special trait of rurality (Woods 2011). The groups, however, were not dedicated to this theme and hence the studied material reflects only a fraction of the total activity. During the course of the project (2018–2021) the communities under study were also researched through phone surveys, focus group interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork. Findings based on the Facebook-derived material presented here, therefore, were also indirectly informed by our supplementary knowledge about the local areas which contributed to shape the findings.

We adopted an abductive approach to coding and analysis, broadly understood as “a creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence” (Tavory and Timmermans 2014:5). In our approach, this can be schematized as a sequence of coding rounds oscillating between extensive (i.e., explorative “scans” across the material, keyword searches, etc.) and intensive (i.e., in-depth analysis of individual statements and interactions) phases and a heuristic movement between the empirical material and our theoretical preconceptions. Initial coding was extensive, including an inventory of broad themes and a deliberate attentiveness to unexpected elements with a view to eliciting critical questions for subsequent coding and analysis. These were then used to pursue a more intensive phase in which we sought to make sense of surprise elements; reflect on how they might disrupt, redirect, or bring nuance to our theoretical preconceptions; and re-evaluate our understanding of the material as a whole, thus prompting another extensive phase. Findings presented in Section 4 and the discussions in Section 5 emerged gradually from this back-and-forth movement.

Studying the activity in place-based Facebook groups provided an occasion to gain insights regarding the ways in which community members interacted with one another to construct and contest different versions of the rural places that they share an affinity with. As argued by Wallace et al. (2017:433) the methodological advantage is that such “online presence shows how communities represent and imagine themselves in ways that are un-elicited.” The limitation is that, like any other approach, it offers only a partial glimpse of what is going on. Group membership and active/passive participation may be skewed toward groups sharing

specific views on the local area and interaction may be guided by informal codes of conduct that our approach is not capable of capturing. Obviously, our findings are limited to Facebook users. Coding and analysis of the material, therefore, required continuous reflection on what it allows us to see, what it may hide, and what the limitations of our inferences are. What it affords are insights regarding the components of everyday life in the community that group members found reason to share communally and how it was received.

### **Findings—Staged and Quotidian Rural Performativity**

To structure the presentation of empirical findings we employ Edensor's terminology of *tasks*, *pleasures*, and *routines* and of performances that are *staged* and those that are *quotidian*. In Section 4.1 we look at the performance of routines; on the one hand, those that are given by nature or tradition, and on the other hand, those that we observe “in the making”. In Section 4.2 we turn attention to pleasures, distinguishing between performances conveying the pleasure of impressions and those forwarding expressive interactions with rural place. Finally, in Section 4.3 we report on findings related to tasks—drawing also on what Ingold (2010) calls the *taskscape*—focusing on the closely related notions of carework and sharework. Now, it is of course entirely possible for a specific performance to comprise a pleasurable, routinised task, implying that our use of tasks, pleasures, and routines does not amount to a mutually exclusive categorization of discrete performances. Rather, we use them to reflect on different aspects of how rurality is performed online. Detailed overviews of findings, including data references, are given in Tables 2–7.

### **The Routines We Are “Given” and the Routines We Make**

Routines are among the building blocks of everyday rhythms, providing a repetitive element and a sense of stability and familiarity. The rhythms of place are composed by both collective and individual routines, some of which are perceived as given by the cosmos—and thus reflecting non-human agency—and/or inherited from history, and others that are still emerging and being made (Edensor, 2010; Lefebvre, 2004). The findings on staged routines in Table 2 reflect precisely this distinction.

When users posted invitations to various communal events, staged performances of cyclical time and routines given by nature and the ways of the cosmos (i.e. the cycles of sun, moon, stars, etc.) cropped up in a range of ways. What is “given”, however, is not the routine as such, but the occasion of its origins and its continued cosmic marking; the routine is human, but it was prompted by the agency of the cosmos. Communal events marking the seasons included winter solstice feasts,

**Table 2. Findings on staged routines in the online performance of rural place**

Routines	Staged	
	Choreographed, directed, scripted	
Given by nature or tradition	Summer and winter solstice feasts	EJ-1, 08.12.2019
	Harvest events	NWJ-5, 22.12.2019
	New year walks	NWJ-3, 31.07.2019
	Letting out the cattle	NWZ-4, 30.12.2019
	Marathons	NWZ-1, 02.05.2019
In the making	Walk & run	NWJ-4, 02.05.2020
	Mountain bike	EJ-1, 16.02.2020
		NWJ-3, 21.12.2019
	Kayaking lessons	NWZ-1, 27.02.2020
	Wild-life hiking	NWZ-3, 04.03.2020
	SZ-1, 05.08.2019	

a harvest meeting, New Year's communal walks, letting out the cattle for the grazing season, as well as the national tradition of midsummer celebrations on St. Johns Eve—found in nearly all communities. Many of these events belong to long-standing and widespread traditions for rural festivity, marking the cyclical time of place, the coming and going of the seasons, and providing occasions for self-celebration connecting current residents with their real-and-imagined ancestors (see also Fisker, Kwiatkowski and Hjalager 2021). The title of a speech at an annual village feast in NWJ-5 (01.06.2019) embodies this: “When we walk in spirited forefathers’ footsteps we stand in the present, rooted in the past, and look into the future.”

As collective practices these events connect to Bennett’s (2014, 2015) notion of *ontological belonging* where the places we inhabit are seen as Maussian gifts: “to belong ontologically is to be implicated in a set of mutual obligations to care for the past and future of places and those who inhabit them” (Bennett 2015:966). Other events were of a more contemporary origin and connect to the kind of outdoor-recreational activities identified in national surveys as the most widespread in the Danish population at large (Friluftsrådet 2017). They included invitations to organized events such as beach marathons, mountain biking on purpose-made forest trails, “walk and run” events, sea kayaking lessons, guided wild-life hiking, and so forth. The connection with ontological belonging becomes even clearer when we consider findings on quotidian routines as shown in Table 3.



**Table 3. Findings on quotidian routines in the online performance of rural place**

Routines	Improvised, sedimented, everyday	Quotidian
Given by nature or tradition	Sunsets, sunrises, full moons, starry nights (daily cycle)	EJ-5, 20.01.2020 NWZ-1, 15.04.2020 SZ-1, 29.03.2020 NWJ-4, 27.08.2019 SZ-1, 05.04.2020 SZ-5, 18.01.2020 SZ-4, 17.01.2020 NWZ-1, 09.04.2020 EJ-1, 01.08.2019
In the making	Walking	EJ-1, 28.10.2019 SZ-1, 05.11.2019 EJ-1, 10.10.2019 EJ-5, 25.09.2019 NWZ-3, 25.08.2019
	Running Horse riding Shelter sleeping	EJ-5, 11.08.2019 SZ-5, 16.04.2020 EJ-2, 08.04.2020

Photo posts in particular favored the changing seasons as a recurring theme: the first lent lily heralding the coming of spring, the first snow of winter, blossoming of the rapeseed fields marking the height of spring, starlings assembling in preparation for their end-of-summer migration, autumn colors and falling leaves, and so on. Likewise, the daily cycle of the cosmos prompted regular postings of sunset, sunrise, and the full moon. Photo captions were used to convey encouragement for others to “get out there”: e.g., “It’s greening out there—can you hear the forest trails calling?”, accompanying a photo of the first green leaves in spring sunshine (NWZ-2, 23.04.2020). The recurring focus on place qualities was often characterized by references to “our place” and generally imbued with a pride of place, often expressed as a thankfulness of living there. The sense of “our place” was strengthened by how users informed each other about routes and meeting places. The information provided was often highly idiosyncratic and occasionally impossible for outsiders to follow: “we meet at 12 o’clock by the big tree” (EJ-1, 17.05.2019).

Mirroring the staged events—and unsurprisingly—quotidian routines also included some of the most widespread outdoor recreational activities. Users actively sought partners for informal outings associated with horse riding, walking, running, and shelter sleeping. The following style was typical: “We are a few of us who’ll take a walk (about an hour) here at 5 o’clock. We meet by the church if anyone wants to join us ☺ and remember, there are no bad excuses, only bad clothing” (EJ-5, 25.09.2019). In some communities these informal requests for walking or running companions were also seen to become routine in more organized ways, prompting users to create separate purpose-specific groups and thus removing this type of posting activity from the general community group.

In addition to formal and informal organizing, group members shared their own experiences from outdoor-recreational activities. These posts were typically photo-based and diverged from the organizing posts by focusing much more on place qualities and much less on the activity itself. Indeed, it is worth noting that we did not find a single instance of users posting about their own level of physical achievement. What we did find was people advising others about the current state of the trail they had just walked and encouragement for others to get going as well, accompanied for instance by friendly reminders that “the trails are always open” (NWZ-1, 17.03.2020) or that kayaks can be borrowed for free and where. Relatedly, users were posting about the barriers they experienced, including walking in the hunting season and negotiating private property rights.

It is difficult to assess the extent to which online community groups alter rural routines. Returning to Edensor’s theatrical metaphor, our findings suggest that online groups develop their own routines of “stage management”, “choreography”, and “conventions about what to do in specific settings” (Edensor 2006:484). Online groups have thus become socially accepted as places for sharing practical information of common interest to the community and for chronicling the experience of everyday life in words and pictures. The latter is perhaps the most significant, because a comparable platform for continually sharing such a chronicle with the community did not exist before the everyday Internet became a mundane technology.

**Impressive and Expressive Pleasures of Place**

The online community groups were used as outlets for communicating both ordinary and extraordinary pleasures of everyday rural life. Broadly, we can distinguish between pleasures based on impressions and those based on individual or collective expression. As before we begin by considering staged pleasures as shown in Table 4.

Among the pleasures posted were the many different events that we have already mentioned in Section 4.1. In addition to invitations—i.e., staging itself—the events were featured in photo posts of pleasurable impressions and notes of appreciation for the organizers both during and after the events. Various degrees of (in)formality were on display here. At the formal end of the spectrum were event reports posted by organizing associations,

**Table 4. Findings on staged pleasures in the online performance of rural place**

Pleasures	Staged	
	Choreographed, directed, scripted	
Impressions	Event photos	NWJ-4, 16.07.2019
	Sensing nature	SZ-1, 04.09.2019
		NWZ-1, 07.07.2019
	Yoga and training	EJ-1, 19.02.2020
		EJ-1, 21.01.2020
Expressions		NWJ-4, 20.06.2019
	Nature art	NWZ-1, 09.11.2019
	Performing arts (choir, theatre, dance)	NWJ-3, 27.09.2019
		NWJ-4, 15.05.2019
		EJ-3, 25.05.2019
	Religious worship	EJ-2, 05.06.2019
		EJ-4, 01.08.2019
		NWJ-2, 12.08.2019
	Surfing	NWJ-4, 31.05.2019

but these were often responded to by individual users commenting on their own pleasurable experiences of the day in question. Other staged impressions of rural place included deliberate attempts to get in closer contact with nature, including, outdoor yoga, nature training, and a “sensing “sing and healing effect. On this trip we will build up our contact with the woods through sensation and feeling” (NWZ-1, 07.07.2019).

Expressive pleasures where cultural activities were deliberately staged in natural surroundings included choir song on a stage in the forest; outdoor theatre by the lighthouse; outdoor church services on the beach, by the lake, and by the old mill; and dancing in the woods. These were all cultural events where nature was cast as a more-or-less passive frame, little more than a pretty backdrop. This relation was inverted in other posts on staged nature art, where local nature was used as sources of material and inspiration for artistic expression as exemplified by the description of a landscape sculpture created in collaboration between an artist and local inhabitants: “The sculpture is made from local materials and symbolizes a collective will to ensure that art is a key part of society” while expressing a “feeling of yearning for a specific place which is deeply embedded in you” (NWZ-1, 09.11.2019).

On the quotidian side (see [Table 5](#)), posts communicating everyday experiences of place and cyclical time were seen to function as communal reminders, prompting comment threads that shared at least three characteristics, all of which are on display in this comment to a photo showing a tree-lined country road dressed in autumn colors:

**Table 5. Findings on quotidian pleasures in the online performance of rural place**

Pleasures	Quotidian	
	Improvised, sedimented, everyday	
Impressions	Naturecultures	NWJ-1, 09.07.2019 SZ-1, 24.03.2020 NWJ-1, 22.08.2019
	Appreciation of place qualities	EJ-3, 24.07.2019 EJ-5, 02.07.2019 NWZ-1, 16.11.2019
	Memory and nostalgia	EJ-1, 28.10.2019 SZ-4, 17.01.2020
Expressions	Stone stacking	NWJ-2, 24.03.2020 EJ-2, 21.07.2019
	Stone painting (pandemic-related)	SZ-5, 14.04.2020 NWZ-5, 05.04.2020

“I get homesick. My parents owned the smithy in [the village] from 1961 to 1991. Wonderful to know that so many cozy things take place in [the village]. Wonderful picture” (EJ-1, 28.10.2019) First, praise for the photographer was almost invariably accompanied by a word of thanks for reminding “us” about local place qualities. Second, conversations turned quickly to a micro-history of the precise spot shown in the photo: who used to live there or just around the corner, childhood anecdotes, etc. Third, these photos invariably elicited emotional response, whether to express the joy of those who lived there or the nostalgia of those who moved away.

The tendency was repeated in many photo posts, where cultural heritage artefacts such as old mills, lighthouses, or an abandoned lime kiln from the industrial revolution provided a cultural focus point framed by nature. Most photo posts either allowed the images to speak for themselves or provided a short caption; e.g. “between trees and heather hills—eight memorial stones tell stories” (NWJ-3, 15.02.2019). But longer captions also appeared on occasion, exhibiting a keen sense of how rural places comprise natureculture assemblages:

The trail, which starts at the South end of [the] Lake and ends by the old kilns at the lime works in [the village], is only about a couple of km long—but the lovely surroundings and the history of the place means that this historic route feels nicely longer... I don't roam far from my home today and am again reminded how lovely an area I live in—here in the middle of the ice-age-created landscape. (NWJ-1, 22.09.2019).

In the span of a few sentences, the post strings together local industrial heritage with the geological time of ice ages and the affective relations of an everyday moment in the here and now—all with a view to how that particular moment was made possible by the complex making of a rural place. Again, we see the appreciation of “being reminded” about the pleasures of local place qualities that also featured in posts on quotidian routines and cyclical time (Section 4.1).

The sense of interaction—or intra-action (cf. Barad and Kleinman 2012; Duggan and Peeren 2020; see also Section 5.1)—on display here also materialized in artistic performances shared online: expressive quotidian pleasures. Most notably, the practice of artistically stacking stones either on the shore or in shallow water trended in several communities, especially in North West Jutland where it culminated in a stone-stacker festival where the quotidian practice metamorphosed into a staged event. In appearance they ranged from simple cairn-like structures to ostensibly impossible formations such as an archway

on water. One stone-stacker specialized in stacking from within his kayak (NWJ-2, 26.12.2019). As an ephemeral form of landscape art, these stacked-stone sculptures last from minutes to days and gain permanence only through the photos and collective memories posted online. They are examples of how rural dwellers engage creatively with local natures, exclusively using elements readily available on site and negotiating the interplay of materials, weather, light, and even gravity to produce everyday artworks that literally “leave no trace” except in the realm of the everyday Internet. During the last few months of the studied period, the COVID-19 pandemic added another such expressive quotidian trend: that of painting stones, often including words of encouragement, placing them in nature, and posting photos for those in home isolation to see.

The pleasure-related posts reinforce the suggestion from Section 4.1 about online groups functioning as multi-authored community chronicles. Here, we see them being used as a means for residents to continually remind themselves about the pleasures that make it worth living in exactly this place. It also clearly provides them with an outlet for giving thanks, sometimes to particular people and organizations and sometimes to no one in particular.

### Carework and Sharework in the Rural Taskscape

The staged and quotidian tasks through which rural places are performed extend way beyond the work-life activities associated with agriculture, forestry, and fishery. By tasks we mean to indicate, like Ingold (2010:63), the activities that “carry forward the process of social life” and which together comprise a taskscape, i.e., “the entire ensemble of tasks, in their mutual interlocking” (Ingold 2010:64).

As we have already seen, outdoor recreational activities were well-represented in the community groups as ways of engaging and encountering local natures. Many communally-organized outdoor activities, however, revolved around carework rather than recreation per se. This included tasks closely related to recreation, where the object of care was recreational possibility pursued through the maintenance and creation of trails and other common spaces, the construction of new facilities, trash collection, and other supportive activities oriented at making—and keeping—places fit for recreation (see Table 6).

When rural places were contested on issues of caring and sharing, the stakes revolved around two basic questions: what aspects of local nature are worth caring for and who do *we* want to share *our* place with? In the examples so far, the latter question was mostly concerned with welcome and unwelcome species. But in the few instances when debates became more

**Table 6. Findings on staged tasks in the online performance of rural place**

Tasks	Staged	
	Choreographed, directed, scripted	
Carework	Annual trash collections	EJ-2, 01.04.2020
	Communal cultivation	NWZ-1, 09.11.2019
	Trail maintenance and creation	NWJ-4, 10.07.2019 NWZ-3, 24.03.2020
Sharework	Facility construction	SZ-5, 08.06.2019
	Rewilding and fields for flowers	EJ-5, 25.07.2019 NWZ-1, 21.09.2019
	Guided tours for locals	NWJ-5, 01.09.2019
	Agricultural community outreach	NWJ-3, 20.09.2019
	Organised protest	SZ-5, 28.08.2019

heated, contestants also invoked notions of welcome and unwelcome people, utilizing various forms of us-them rhetoric. In SZ-5 a local retiree had spent years on the task of fitting out a local beach for recreation and communal get-togethers. Then a complaint was lodged with the municipality and the coastal authorities, because someone worried that the new stones on the beach posed a danger of head injuries to children. The complainant had settled in the community a few years previously, having moved there from Copenhagen. Local outrage ensued when authorities announced that the beach would have to close and be returned to its “natural”/“original” condition. The tone in the community group was harsh:

She should stay in inner Copenhagen [*på stenbroen*] where she belongs. There, you can only fall off the curb or out of the 10th floor window. Out here in countryside (read peripheral Denmark [*udkantsdanmark*] in her terminology) we have survived for millennia; bruises and a bump on the forehead doesn't kill you. But if you binge beer and don't watch your kids, then many things can go wrong. (SZ-5, 28.08.2019).

While other comments were less militant, they echoed the core sentiment and shared in the construction of “Copenhagengers” as unwelcome others, e.g.: “I think it's nonsense to destroy the fine work that's been done and that we from the area admire and enjoy. A Copenhagener should not be allowed to destroy this; stay in Copenhagen” (SZ-5, 11.08.2019). Instead of merely opposing the merit of the complaint itself, these commenters targeted the legitimacy of the complainant based on her perceived status

as an outsider who had outstayed her welcome by going up against one of the “real” locals. They also targeted state authorities and the municipality for siding with the outsider in comments staking territorial claims on “our” rural place and rushing to defend the local retiree:

I have said neither for or against, but now I cannot keep my mouth shut anymore. I agree that such a stone arrangement has to be safe, but to highlight [name] as an “old retired fisherman” where you worry about the competencies, that smells like something I don’t like. Enough said. (SZ-5, 28.08.2019).

Recreational space in the rural communities under study is rarely separable from the ordinary places of everyday life and it is therefore not surprising that tasks associated with care for outdoor recreation spaces spilled over from the staged into the quotidian (see [Table 7](#)). These tasks were, however, as much about general care for the qualities of place. Frequent posts on these topics report on instances of vandalism, facilities in need of maintenance, and calls for people to clean up after themselves and their dogs.

Task-oriented engagement with local natures was simultaneously utilitarian and genuinely concerned with the welfare of non-human others. Users shared know-how about bird feeding practices, posted photos of

**Table 7. Findings on quotidian tasks in the online performance of rural place**

Tasks	Quotidian	
	Improvised, sedimented, everyday	
Carework	Reminders about trash and dog droppings	SZ-1, 07.01.2020 SZ-5, 10.07.2019
	Reports about vandalism and decay	SZ-4, 02.10.2019 EJ-2, 10.11.2019
	Insects and flowers	SZ-1, 21.03.2020 EJ-5, 25.06.2019
	Feeding and breeding grounds for wildlife	EJ-5, 21.08.2019 SZ-5, 14.01.2020
	Private property and the right to roam	EJ-2, 13.07.2019 SZ-4, 08.11.2019 NWZ-5, 03.06.2019
Sharework	Encouragement and outdoor advise	EJ-5, 02.07.2019 NWZ-1, 17.03.2020 NWZ-2, 17.09.2019
	(Un)welcome natural others	NWZ-3, 29.06.2019 NWZ-3, 30.06.2019 EJ-1, 03.10.2019



airborne visitors to their feeding boards, and discussed how local natures could become better breeding grounds. Reflecting a broader trend, the important role of insects for the well-being of local ecosystems also came into focus when users posted instructions on how to build insect hotels and when farmers announced setting aside fields for wild flowers. The utilitarian aspect became even more pronounced in practices of communal cultivation where the online meeting place was used to organize the informal exchange of vegetables, fruit, flowers, and seeds as well as gardening and bee-keeping know-how. Users offered each other a share in the surplus of foraging forays into local natures and exchanged information about the best foraging and fishing spots. Comment threads on such topics also included mutual help on species identification and recipe advice.

Care for nature was a key thematic driver for the contestation of rural place imaginaries. In NWZ-3 two such instances occurred within the same week in June 2019 albeit with different contestants and stakes. First, a brief discussion was sparked by a post lamenting that moles were dying from thirst during a prolonged spell of drought. The user suggested spots where new waterholes ought to be dug to alleviate the problem. He got the, only half-joking, response that “if there’s a lack of moles, then I’ve got a couple of those devils in my garden. And you can collect them free of charge” (NWZ-3, 29.06.2019), a sentiment seconded by several others. He replied by reminding them that their cats and dogs were also suffering and that moles were not the only casualties. The next day a longer and more entrenched debate was provoked by a user asking when, and if, the roadside vegetation along a specific country road would be trimmed. One response turned the problem upside down: “No way! Drive carefully and enjoy the biodiversity. Roadsides are important for plants, insects and other animals” (NWZ-3, 30.06.2019). From then on the debate revolved around two basic questions: first, how to prioritize between respecting the needs of nature and eliminating road hazards, and second, whether nature or bad drivers were responsible for those hazards. Elsewhere, the keeping of cattle in a national park prompted similar debates about weighing nature care against the perceived safety of walking visitors to the park (EJ-1, 03.10.2019).

In addition to contestations about who is welcome in *our* place, other animated discussions revolved around who is welcome in *my* place with explicit reference to private property. These arose out of specific instances of alleged trespassing, especially regarding horse riding. Territorial claims to private property were, however, also occasionally made on behalf of others as general reminders of “proper” behavior:

“Remember to ask the respective land owners if it’s okay that you roam and disturb their nature before you walk there” (NWZ-5, 03.06.2019). Such attempts at social control were made even where the intended activity was clearly within existing roaming rights.<sup>2</sup> In the quoted instance, the user posting the activity—a communal walk in the meadows—was well aware of this and simply responded by inviting the commenter to come along.

## Discussion

### Performing Routines, Pleasures, and Tasks Online

The mediated making of rural places today cannot be meaningfully appreciated without considering the implications of the everyday Internet. But does the everyday Internet actually make a difference for performing rurality or does it comprise little more than the addition of yet another communication channel? In relation to our findings, we can ask this a bit differently: were the identified routines, pleasures, and tasks merely online representations of offline performances? Or was there more to it? To some extent, it was indeed merely communication in the sense of using Facebook to create online visibility for an offline performance. But even in these cases, the online extension of the performance was conditioned by the medium itself, for instance by favoring the use of photo sharing and, and regulated by the social media norms of short, informal texts with little to no regard for formal spelling and grammar conventions. Similarly, community response made use of the platform’s standardized emoji-based reactions, affording the possibility of conveying emotional reactions. So, the form of online performance relied on the affordances of Facebook with little to no attempts at circumvention, and sociability was seen to be regulated by a mix of local and online norms.

But it does go deeper than this. Early in our oscillations between empirical analysis and theoretical ideas, we fastened on the notion of *ontological belonging* that Julia Bennett appropriated for sociology from its origins in anthropology. Taking her cue from Miller (2003), Bennett (2014, 2015) positioned belonging-in-place as a performative concept, something we *do* as opposed to something we feel or possess, a doing set in the minute details of everyday life. Taking additional inspiration from Lefebvrian rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre 2004), she held that “belonging

<sup>2</sup>Unlike the other Scandinavian countries, a general right to roam (*allemandsret*) does not exist in Denmark. Walking is, however, permitted on all uncultivated and unfenced lands as well as along the coastlines. In private forests and fields walking is only allowed on trails and only from 6 a.m. until sunset.

is done through the rhythms and activities of everyday life” (Bennett 2015:955). Engaging with other rural dwellers in online community spaces is clearly one such activity which is folded into everyday rhythm as a routine, pleasure, or task of its own, related to but also distinct from the offline performances it often refers to. For the rural dwellers using Facebook in this way, then, the everyday Internet has become one of the stages on which they perform belonging. The most significant difference that this addition makes to Edensor’s account of rural performativity, thus has to do with how it alters the “time-geographies which shape the ways in which people’s trajectories separate and intersect in regular ways” (Edensor 2006:492).

### **Digital Third Places between the Staged and the Quotidian**

A finding that surprised us was that openly political and strategic aspects of rural performativity were very rare in our material—with Section 4.3 accounting for the most notable exceptions. Previous literature has highlighted how rural dwellers “fight back” against stigmatizing narratives (e.g., Kasabov 2020; Lundgren and Liliequist 2020; Winther and Svendsen 2012), and we know from focus group interviews conducted as part of the wider project that local actors in the studied communities are indeed engaged in such struggles. Our interpretation of the near absence of such performances in the groups is that sociability on these online stages is conducted according to the social norms associated with *third places* (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982) where scheming, strategizing and purposiveness are avoided to generate an atmosphere of “pure” sociability. Even in these places, however, political reality tends to occasionally impose its presence prompting the kind of politicized interactions that we did find.

This leads us to ask whether there is a potential for such digital third places to evolve into a new form of agonistic space (Mouffe 2013), where conversations may be had across otherwise divisive political frontiers. While this is certainly not an achieved reality in the studied groups, it seems to us that place-based rural community groups harbor at least the possibility of allowing differences and diverging opinions to coexist and interdigitate. Social science research on social media platforms has often emphasized the algorithmic power that such platforms wield over their human users (e.g., Beer 2017; Bucher 2012), invoking a reality where algorithms “have smoothed out the erratic, agonistic and unpredictable nature of everyday sociality between chronically imperfect human beings” (Mould 2018:147). Beneath the apparently smoothed out surface, however, other platform-based sociabilities may emerge with the potential to reconstitute an agonistic encounter. Place-based rural

community groups may be capable of doing this, because algorithmic power can be rendered ineffective when news feeds are small enough for a human being to “take it all in” unfiltered, while most group members also know each other offline and interact in many other ways. We do not thereby mean to suggest that the studied community groups have actually created agonistic spaces but merely that it is not the algorithmic power of platforms that stands in the way of it. What Velkova and Kaun (2021) has referred to as “algorithmic resistance” is entirely possible, but this does not mean that it always occurs. On this point, our findings offer no further elucidation, but they do at least allow us to pose the question.

### **Caring and Sharing Online in Place-based Communities**

Although the categories of caring and sharing were treated as separate topics in the findings section, we need to emphasize here that they were present throughout the empirical material. To reflect further on this we need to go back to the notion of ontological belonging as dealt with above (see Section 5.1). Bennett (2015:956) elaborates that “in order to belong, ontologically, one must understand, in a corporeal sense (...), the place (locality), change over time (history) and the local society (community)” and that “to belong ontologically is to be implicated in a set of mutual obligations to care for the past and future of places and those who inhabit them” (Bennett 2015:966). Our findings resonate with these ideas in that an ethics of care towards a shared rural place was clearly present. But whereas Bennett followed Miller (2003) in celebrating ontological belonging as “a state of being in *correct* relation to community, history and locality” (Bennett 2015:957, emphasis added), we saw how it may also become a marker and driver of exclusion, division, and strife. This was particularly evident when important matters of local place-making were debated. In those instances, acknowledged ontological belonging was seen as a prerequisite for having a legitimate right to be heard. In other words, only those rural dwellers deemed by their peers to belong ontologically were accepted as “real locals”, implicitly casting everyone else as “fake locals” whose welcome was conditioned upon their willingness to conform to the “correct” way of belonging. Ontological belonging, then, needs to be used as a critical rather than a celebrational notion. This further underlines the agonistic limitations discussed above (Section 5.2).

To be able to take one step further in understanding our findings, we find it relevant at this point to connect with Nancy’s (2000) efforts to rethink “community” as “being-in-common”. Community, in this sense, is always emergent and never preexists the practice of sharing: “what is shared is nothing like a unique substance in which each being would

participate; what is shared is also what shares, what is structurally constituted by sharing” (Nancy 2000:83). This is a performative concept of community, something made to happen rather than something that simply is (Nancy 2000:151f), and therefore requiring work in order to happen continually. When the performative sense of community meets the notion of ontological belonging, it becomes clear that the relation between those who belong and the place to which they belong is also performative and co-constitutive of both themselves and that place. We interpret the carework and sharework identified in the online community groups as reflecting a performance of belonging-in-place, and it is primarily in this way that the online performance becomes more than a representation of corresponding offline performances. Posting impressions or expressions related to engagements with local natures and landscapes in a community group, then, can be seen simultaneously as an occasion for partaking in the sociability of a digital third place, and as a performative act of displaying one’s belonging-in-place by writing it into an online community chronicle.

### Conclusion

By exploring the mediated making of rural places in community Facebook groups across the Danish countryside, this paper contributes to the emerging pool of knowledge around the social, cultural, and political implications that flow from the rise of social media platforms as technologies of rural sociability. In particular, our findings highlight how outdoor activities and engagement with local natures are communally shared and performed online. Our more specific aim was to explore how our understandings of performing rurality fare in the age of the everyday Internet, taking Edensor (2006) as our specific entry point. We found that his theatrical metaphor continues to be useful if we add the “stages” of the everyday Internet, including community Facebook groups. Performances did not diverge markedly from expectations and in this sense the everyday Internet appears as an additional means of communication and social interaction which—like other mundane technologies—conditions performativity through its affordances.

We found reasons to suggest tentatively that the community groups may be considered as *digital third places*, thus taking a step in the direction of characterizing the added stage. Our interpretation was based on the surprising near absence of openly politicized performances in communities otherwise known to be involved in counterhegemonic politics of the rural. It seems to us that political confrontation was instead confined to other stages, but this will require further work to substantiate. In any case, it is remarkable that this partial immunization against politics

was seemingly achieved without deliberate collective decision-making or policing of the groups. Instead, it seemed to be premised only on the individual decisions of those posting and commenting. Since third places are generally characterized by an inclusive and inviting atmosphere, we want to point out the potential of digital third places for playing host to political conversations marked by conviviality and agonism rather than polarization and antagonism, but we also want to underline that this is by no means what we found empirically. On the other hand, our findings also did not line up with taken-for-granted truths about echo-chamber construction or the unstoppable power of algorithms. While such issues are real enough under other circumstances, they seem to be at least partially eliminated by the place-based, inclusive, and human-scaled character of community groups.

The other key finding was that the performances in community groups can be beneficially understood as performative acts of belonging-in-place, referring to previous work on ontological belonging (Bennett 2015). In combination in Nancy's (2000) performative conception of community as being-in-common this led us to emphasize that the performance of belonging is also co-constitutive with the place-based communities to which belonging is performed. Understanding place-based communities in this way is, in our view, capable of warding off the lurking individualism and exclusionary force of ontological belonging as this concept has previously been used. It also dispelled our initial concern that what we were seeing in the groups was merely online representations of offline phenomena. While this is clearly part of it, the act of sharing experiences, impressions, events, and so forth has to be seen also as a performance in its own right. Being digital and online does not make it less real than the embedded performances to which it refers, and although its role in performing rurality is certainly different we found no reason to suggest that it should not be reckoned with. Posting in the groups points to a desire for sharing one's experiences with the community and the act of doing so becomes one of the routines of everyday life.

Our methodological approach, however, was limited by only considering material that was visible to us in public groups. We treated posts (text, photos, videos, event invites, links, etc.) and comments as undifferentiated utterances. But we deliberately did not view the associated user profiles to map political views, other affiliations, and so forth. The reason for this was privacy concerns and the fact that our object of research was the community groups and not the individual users. We highlight this to clarify the limitations of our findings and to point out directions for future research. First, it is clear that taking further steps would require combining empirical material from different data sources, including ones that capture offline

performance as well (see for instance Wallace et al. 2017) in order to be able to study online-offline relations. Second, there is a need to conduct similar studies which take in the whole breadth of activity in online community groups rather than being limited to one thematic orientation.

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