

POLICY BRIEF 6 · TERRITORIAL REPUTATION

Digital Rurality and Territorial Reputation: How Platforms Shape the Visibility of Low-Density Destinations

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KEY MESSAGE

Low-density destinations are not only discovered through platforms; they are partly produced by them. Digital visibility can attract remote workers, but it can also simplify, romanticise or distort rural life. Territorial reputation should therefore be governed deliberately, not left entirely to rankings, reviews and platform narratives.

Platforms as territorial intermediaries

Remote workers rarely discover a village by accident. They find it through a nomad directory, a ranking, a social-media post, an online community thread or a booking platform. These intermediaries do not merely transmit information about a place; they shape how it is seen. A growing body of research on platform urbanism shows that digital platforms function as active infrastructures that organise visibility, mediate access and structure the socio-spatial experience of places rather than passively reflecting them (Barns, 2019).

What has been studied extensively for cities applies, with sharper effects, to low-density territories. Research on the short-term rental industry has shown how digital platforms enable professional, corporate management to restructure local accommodation markets through vertical integration, displacing smaller and individual hosts (Cocola-Gant et al., 2021). For a small rural destination, a single platform listing, ranking position or viral post can determine whether it is seen at all. The territory does not control this layer, yet the layer shapes the territory's reputation, the expectations of those who arrive, and ultimately the pressure placed on local housing and services.

Building on socio-cultural cartography and border-territoriality debates, this brief treats digital spaces not only as communication channels but as layers of visibility, belonging and territorial mediation (Marcelino, in preparation). A place exists, for the mobile worker, partly as it is rendered online. Governing that rendering is therefore a legitimate territorial concern, not a marketing afterthought.

The promise and the risk of digital visibility

Digital visibility is genuinely valuable for low-density territories. It lowers the cost of being discovered, allows a small place to reach a global audience without a large budget, and can connect a territory to a community of potential medium-stay residents it could never reach through

traditional channels. For places that have historically been invisible in national and international imaginaries, this is a real opportunity.

But visibility is not neutral, and it is not evenly distributed. The same mechanisms that make discovery cheap also concentrate attention and distort representation. Three risks deserve particular attention from municipalities and platforms alike.

Rankings reward the already-visible. Directories and ranking systems tend to favour destinations that are already connected, photogenic and 'sellable'. Places with strong existing reputation, good imagery and prior reviews rise; places that are less polished, less documented or simply newer remain invisible regardless of their actual quality. Visibility accrues to those who already have it, which can deepen rather than reduce territorial inequality.

Reviews and metrics compress complexity. A territory's life, including its services, its community, its seasonal rhythms and its limitations, is compressed into a score, a star rating or a short caption. This compression is efficient for the searcher but lossy for the place. Nuances that matter for a months-long stay (winter service gaps, the real state of connectivity, the texture of community life) rarely survive the format.

Narratives can outrun reality. Platform and influencer narratives can generate expectations a territory cannot yet meet. When the online image promises a connected, vibrant rural idyll that the place does not deliver on arrival, the gap produces disappointment, short stays and negative word-of-mouth in tightly connected communities, damaging precisely the reputation the visibility was meant to build.

Digital rurality: when rural life becomes content

There is a deeper dynamic beneath these risks. As rural places enter digital circulation, rural life itself becomes content: images, narratives and experiences produced for and circulated through platforms. The literature on rural place branding documents how rural identity is increasingly curated and marketed, and warns that this process can drift from representing a place toward manufacturing a marketable version of it (Gulisova et al., 2021).

The romanticisation of rurality is the central risk. The mobile worker is offered an aestheticised rural (slow mornings, scenic landscapes, authentic community) that functions as a backdrop for a lifestyle rather than as a living territory with its own economy, conflicts and needs. When a place is consumed as scenery, the people who live there can become extras in someone else's narrative, and the territory's genuine development needs are obscured by its image.

Crucially, this is not simply a matter of distortion that a more accurate image would fix. Research on digital rurality shows that online spaces do not merely represent the countryside; they actively produce it, generating competing images of rural areas as either dying or alive through the everyday practice of what has been called performative re-representation (Lundgren & Johansson, 2017). The territory that appears online is therefore always a construction; the question is whose construction it is, and whether the people who live there have a part in making it.

This matters because the digital nomad imaginary is powerful and portable. Research on the geographies of digital nomadism shows how the figure travels with a set of expectations about place that may bear little relation to local realities (Sciuva, 2025), and work on transnational remote workers in urban markets shows how this imaginary interacts with, and can reshape, the places that host it (Sequera, 2025). A territory that allows its reputation to be built entirely by this imaginary cedes control over how it is understood, and over who feels it is 'for them'.

Why reputation must match readiness

The unifying principle is simple: a territory's digital reputation should not exceed its real capacity to host. When reputation runs ahead of readiness, the territory attracts arrivals it cannot serve, generating disappointment, churn and reputational damage. When reputation lags behind genuine readiness, the territory remains invisible despite being a good place to host. Aligning the two is a governance task.

This connects digital reputation to the wider sequence the series has set out. Territorial readiness concerns whether a place can host well across capacity, compatibility, integration and risk (Marcelino, 2026b). Territorial intelligence concerns assembling the evidence to know (Marcelino, 2026a). Reputation is the outward-facing layer: it is how the territory's readiness, or lack of it, is communicated and perceived. Managing reputation responsibly means ensuring that what is projected online corresponds to what the territory can actually deliver on the ground. Reputation without readiness is overpromising at scale; readiness without reputation is a missed opportunity. The aim is alignment, governed deliberately rather than left to the platforms.

Guidelines for responsible territorial communication

- 1. Communicate readiness, not fantasy.** Project only what the territory can deliver today: verified connectivity, real services, genuine community openness. Aspirational imagery that outruns reality is a reputational liability, not an asset.
- 2. Own the narrative actively.** A territory that does not shape its own digital representation will have it shaped by rankings, reviews and third-party narratives. Producing honest, locally-grounded content is a way of keeping the place's self-understanding present in its online image.
- 3. Involve the community in representation.** Residents should have a voice in how their place is portrayed. Representation produced with the community, rather than about it, is both more accurate and more protective against the reduction of local life to scenery.
- 4. Treat platforms as partners with responsibilities.** Platforms that intermediate low-density destinations share responsibility for the accuracy of what they circulate. Municipalities and regional agencies can ask platforms to support honest representation, flag verified information and avoid amplifying claims a territory cannot substantiate.
- 5. Monitor the gap between image and experience.** Track whether arrivals' expectations, formed online, match their experience on arrival. A widening gap is an early warning that reputation has decoupled from readiness and that communication needs correcting.

Practical checklist for municipalities, platforms and regional agencies

Responsible digital reputation is not about hiding weaknesses; it is about aligning visibility with what the territory can actually sustain.

- ✓ Audit how the territory currently appears across the main platforms, directories and social channels, and identify where the online image overstates reality.
- ✓ Verify that the specific claims circulating online (connectivity, services, amenities) are accurate for the actual locations being represented.
- ✓ Produce at least some honest, locally-grounded content that reflects the territory as it is, including its limitations and its seasonal realities.
- ✓ Involve residents in deciding how their community is portrayed, so representation is made with the community rather than about it.
- ✓ Engage platforms directly about accuracy: ask what they amplify, how rankings are formed, and whether verified local information can be surfaced.
- ✓ Establish a simple way to detect the gap between online expectation and on-arrival experience, for example, brief feedback from early arrivals.
- ✓ Align the communication plan with the territory's actual readiness assessment, so reputation and capacity move together.

Methodological note

The dataset is exploratory by design. It does not represent the entire population of digital nomads or low-density territories. Its value lies in documenting early demand, testing conceptual assumptions, identifying preference patterns and informing the development of a territorial-readiness approach. This brief is conceptual and draws primarily on the published academic literature on platform urbanism, rural place branding, digital rurality and the geographies of digital nomadism, together with policy framing from the NomadVillage Research Series. Where the pre-registration survey is referenced elsewhere in the series, its findings are exploratory and self-selected and should be read as early signals rather than representative evidence. No causal claims are made, and no individual or platform-specific data are disclosed.

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