

Special Collection

Introduction: Media Representations of the Arctic

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Guest Editor

The Arctic has been under the media gaze for a considerable amount of time, both in traditional media and popular culture. Explorers' tales of the region have occupied a preeminent place in popular culture, describing the Arctic in mythical ways. These tales have contributed to persistent preconceptions of the region in the popular imagination. As Hansson (2018) points out, the Arctic was portrayed as a site for heroic endeavours, a futile objective for potential conquerors, as otherworldly, and as a gendered space. The Arctic is primarily presented as an area to dominate, to subjugate rather than to embrace or live in. Indeed, references are seldom made to people inhabiting this space, rendering the region as an empty space.

Traditional media has also focused and framed the region in specific terms, molding public perceptions about the Arctic. For example, traditional media has devoted significant attention to framing the region as a zone for economic development (especially natural resource extraction) and as an area to protect from sovereignty and security threats (Nicol, 2013; Landriault, 2016; Gritsenko, 2016).

However, scholarship on explorers' tales and traditional media has constituted a rather modest corpus of research. In most research, attention is centred on conducting content analysis to list popular frames, and focuses on how Arctic issues are described, without investigating the motives or intentions of reporters or media outlets. In turn, very little attention is devoted to understanding why these frames are popular or more frequently relayed in media outlets.

Additionally, the media and popular culture are in constant evolution: they are embodied now by different media formats. Media consumption has changed spectacularly in the past fifteen years, with consumers being informed and entertained by social media and streaming platforms, rather than by radio, literature, and newspapers. Unfortunately, social media coverage of the Arctic is not well understood. As society and vectors of influence evolve, we must change our focus to understanding these emerging media sources.

This special collection aims to make a modest contribution to this enterprise, adding to a growing body of literature that investigates how new forms of media and popular culture describe and define what the Arctic region is about. Additionally, we must understand how social media users and reporters perceive the region in a diverse media ecosystem: media, whether traditional or social, do not evolve in a bubble, away from other social and political actors. A guiding objective of this special collection is also to interrogate how social media users and reporters relate to other actors (such as governmental officials, researchers, and industry) who are working on Arctic issues.

In the article by Charlotte Gehrke, the author presents and analyzes empirical evidence exploring why news creators, including journalists, are referring to Arctic marine mammals in their reporting. Pragmatic factors such as budget and time constraints as well as value-based factors have proven to be influential in shaping how media outlets are reporting on Arctic issues.

The other two articles focus on how the Arctic region and its inhabitants are portrayed on social media. Gabriella Gricius studies how Arctic threats were conceptualized by users on one social media platform, X (formerly Twitter). Arctic insecurity is more frequently linked to environmental issues and developments, and to local stories rather than global ones. For their part, Landriault, Millette, and LaFortune explore which users were posting messages about Inuit issues on X (Twitter). Inuit social media users form a relatively small but significantly active group of users, contributing to how Inuit issues are framed on the platform. On the other hand, non-Inuit users rarely relayed stories posted by Inuit users, highlighting the potential for Inuit allies to more actively promote Inuit voices on social media.

We hope that this special collection will act as a springboard for Arctic researchers who focus on media outlets, to join forces on cooperative initiatives. In particular, the study of social media warrants more scrutiny: this effort can only be led by working together to form multilingual and multidisciplinary research teams.

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