
Coppélie Cocq and Thomas A. Dubois. *Sámi Media and Indigenous Agency in the Arctic North*. University of Washington Press, 2020. 334 pp. ISBN: 9780295746609

<https://uwapress.uw.edu/book/9780295746609/Sámi-media-and-indigenous-agency-in-the-arctic-north/>

Sámi Media and Indigenous Agency in the Arctic North is part of a series called *New Directions in Scandinavian Studies*, which is set on offering interdisciplinary approaches to the study of the Nordic region of Scandinavia and the Baltic States. This book's focus area is on the Sámi and their agency through – and use of – different media, and it is written by Coppélie Cocq, professor of European Ethnology at the University of Helsinki, and Thomas A. Dubois, Halls-Bascom Professor of Scandinavian Studies, Folklore, and Religious Studies at the University of Wisconsin. The acknowledgments also display the highly collaborative groundwork for this book, recognizing the help from a series of sources, where many are Sámi themselves and/or come from the field of Sámi Studies and the broader Indigenous Studies, as well as Communication and Digital Studies.

The book is written with the intention of including a multitude of voices that enrich the material in various ways, leaving it to the final two authors to weave the material into a cohesive book. This, however, seem at times to be a challenge. It is clear that the authors want to show how agency and activism through media are part of a process of decolonization, where Sámi create and take back the agency of self-representation, but there are some stumbles, especially concerning what media the authors want to cover and how. For instance, the blurb on the back of the book highlights how it contributes to how digital media have become an integral part of daily life, yet this is not the turning point of the book. Or rather, it's not for at least the first four chapters. The reasons seem to stem from the use and appliance of the term "media" when speaking of Sámi media.

"Media" is a slippery term because it constitutes different meanings depending on which field the term is used in. The book itself is located in this muddy field, as it tries to merge different conceptualisations of media. These conceptualisations are media as material, media as socio-technical formats of cultural expressions, and media as communication technologies. While "media" and "mediation" can have onto-epistemological meaning following Media Theory and, for instance, media philosopher John Durham Peters, other disciplines treat media as material or as a defined type of cultural artifact (arts). Others again see media as either mass media and social media, meaning media which transmit human forms of communication through semantic signs, being either presentational (the latter) or representational (the former). Here, the focus is not on the material, as much as the communication.

While there are certain chapters in the book that are a joy to read, while also providing the reader with important insights and thorough analysis, the book as a whole seems to want to say too much. This can be seen in the various rationales provided in both the introduction and the concluding chapter of the book. In the introduction, the book is described as covering "Sámi language communications" (5), where song and film seem to be treated as the same type of communication (or medium) as a social media platform. This is also echoed in the concluding chapter, which summarizes the book as providing the reader with "self-representations through different media" (276). The scope is defined as presenting and analyzing how "Indigenous identity become articulated in media products" (27), but also Sámi "presence and activism in modern digital media," and further on stating that the matters discussed are produced

media and *participatory social media* (28). This is, however, the clearest summary of the book, which also presents an interesting scope because it indicates that the text will look at both the media products themselves (as media) as well as the presence of Sámi in communicative media and social media, as just two examples. Accounting for what was stated earlier in the introduction, there must also be a semantic element of Sámi language present in the products and communicative acts done through the communicative media.

The book is divided into seven chapters (plus an introduction and a conclusion), progressing chronologically from mainly the 1970s to today; each chapter uses a specific Sámi word for “snow,” representing and naming the era in which the chapter is situated in relation to the state of Sámi agency. Chapter 1 reads as a sort of historical summary of Sámi media pre-1970s. The chapter chooses, as a describing media produced for this time, a particular song from the 1600s, and the communicative functions realized through song as a medium in this historical context. Chapter 2 concerns the use of images and sound in mass media in relation to a demonstration and protest, focusing on how Sámi agency and activism tied to the Alta protests were presented in mass media at the time, as well as the adoption of radio and television used by the Sámi. Chapter 3 then takes a step out into the global world, and how Sámi participated in showcasing “otherness” and making it a positive attribute. Chapter 4 gives an overview of the main features of recent Sámi film and music in relation to activism through the choice of four films and four music videos, from the turn of the century up to today. Here, we have reached the media products of today, and there is a change from one main product to multiple products being addressed.

While films and music videos rightly took up a lot of cultural space at the start of this century, it seems strange to not include any other media products beyond the audio-visual. A new medium, which carries the same type of aesthetic function as novels, films, and songs, is games. In addition to games, there are also graphic novels and digital literature, as well as multiple cultural artifacts produced and distributed outside traditional established channels. Since this book is published in 2020, it seems weird not to mention the Sámi influence of the Disney movie *Frozen*. Last year saw the release of *Skábma* (2022), a game fully voiced in Northern Sámi, following the trail of the *Sami Game Jam* of 2018 and games such as *Gufihtara eallu* (2018) and *Rievssat* (2018). These games seem to qualify for inclusion since the theme of Cocq and Dubois’s book is related to agency and activism. Novels as medium also seem to be missing, without the authors explicitly stating why. Here, Swede and Sámi author Ann-Helén Laestadius has made a noticeable impact in the Nordic countries. Likewise, the Norwegian and Sámi author Sigbjørn Skåden has been particularly noticeable in the Norwegian public and literary sphere.

Chapter 5 contextualizes the Sámi use of participatory online media, and thus starts the second part of the book, which looks beyond media products, instead focusing more on digital social media as communicative and participatory media. This is followed by Chapter 6, which goes deeper into the role of social media in relation to the Sámi community. The contextualization shows good use of highly relevant sources (Bruns, Fuchs, Morozov, and Jenkins) in relation to understanding contemporary digital social media and how participatory online media has the potential for challenging structural power relations. However, it does fall short, after a while, in its dealing with social media as social media. One such shortcoming is in comparing the online community forum SámiNet with Facebook, when the more proper comparison, at the right scale, would be with a specific Facebook group.

Chapter 7 addresses how digital media can be used for outreach by Indigenous online communication, especially concerning language revitalization and Sámi representations and imagery. As one example, the text discusses the activist-artist collective *Suohpanterror* and how they use social media to disseminate their works and practice digital activism. The chapter addresses digital activism and touches upon the use of hashtags, but it does not otherwise engage with the established field of hashtag activism research, and engagement with the processes of

digital activism falls flat. Likewise, the chapter draws upon research concerning the structures of Web 1.0, without any reflection on whether these results fit with the Web 2.0 infrastructure of today. The chapter also has a sub-par walkthrough of the concept of filter bubbles, when it applies, and to what it applies, instead choosing not to use the most established research on the phenomenon (i.e. *Are Filter Bubbles Real?*, by Axel Bruns (2019)), even though Bruns is cited earlier in relation to social media in general. Overall, the authors' hold on and knowledge of social media seem at times to be a bit shallow, as evidenced when they write that "Social Media is identified as a place where young people spend time" (255).

With the advent of Web 2.0 and the dominance of Instagram over Facebook in the later years (now replaced by TikTok), there is also a trend of Indigenous influencers which could have been addressed in this particular chapter. Maxida Mäarak, while being primarily known as an artist, has also taken on the role of a Sámi influencer on Instagram. Likewise, the Sámi opera singer and influencer Adrian Angelico has, for the last few years, used his status on Instagram and TikTok as a way to promote Sámi visibility through online engagement and activism, both in-reach and outreach. This dual work that so many Indigenous influencers do today is an important aspect and is something that was greatly missed from Cocq and Dubois's chapter. The chapter could also have benefitted from a more thorough analysis of power relations, mediation, and agency in relation to the use of different social media.

As can be seen, the media products (produced media) are mostly covered in the first part of the book, while the use of communicative media are covered in the latter half of the book. They otherwise do not engage much with each other, an issue which could have been mitigated by looking at a specific media product in a particular social media context. Where are all the media products of today? And how do Indigenous identity and activism get entangled in the larger media ecologies of media products, accounting for the type of distributional and communicative media that take part in the life of a cultural artifact (or "media product," to use the authors' preferred term)? It could have helped to have a rationale for why cultural artifacts are suddenly bracketed, while technologies and new mediative ways are centered in the last three chapters of the book.

This lack of a structural rationale may make the text challenging to read for those in working in Media Theory, as the focus of media changes: from artistic media as cultural artifacts (such as songs and movies) to communication technologies and technology as distributional media for communication. However, it should be noted that there is an attempt to merge these concepts through "the evolving sociopolitical project of building Sámi indigenous awareness and solidarity" (6). However, following this statement is a definition of communication which seems to use a very American pragmatic communications studies approach and which strays away from communication in relation to media and mediation. This means that the book can (perhaps a bit shallowly) state that the northern Sámi translation of communication, *gulahallan*, emphasizes not what is transferred but the process of meaningful interaction between two people in conversation. As the authors write, "*gulahallan* connotes more a sense of negotiated and then mutually shared understanding than a simple transfer of property or information" (11-12), a definition which, they say, is different from the common definition of communication. But from a media theory point of view, *gulahallan* is actually not that different from how communication as mediation is defined. Here, it could have been fruitful to use the works of the previously mentioned media philosopher John Durham Peters, who has written two important works on communication and media, or to use the (European) media ecological perspective, which, as an onto-epistemological framework, has much in common with many Indigenous epistemologies on how to view the world in relations and entanglements and not as simple transfers.

However, there are some other caveats in the first chapters of the book as well, especially concerning the commodification of cultural otherness presented in Chapter 3. The chapter is

missing some specificities tied to how the Sámi language gained success internationally and on what grounds. The text further states, concerning the music of the 1970s and 80s, that “Swedish and Norwegian groups were having their greatest economic success mimicking the sounds and whiteness of America” (86). But if we are to turn to the influential Norwegian pop group A-Ha in the 80s, this problematizes such a statement. Both the name (a Norwegian expression) and syntax (singing “take on me” instead of the grammatically correct English phrase “touch me”) were ways of promoting their Norwegian-ness. While it might be true that internationally Scandinavian pop singers sang in American English, using sounds and rhythms derived from international pop music norms, it is a stretch to say that the globalization of American pop music does not come without any opposing forces. Globalization is often conceived as the reproduction of the same culture throughout the world, but looking closely, there is always an element of glocalization happening. Further on, the 1970s and 80s also saw great success in the use of Norwegian in songs (look to the major success of the Norwegian genre *trønderrock*, for instance) from pop stars who never ventured outside of the Norwegian borders or sing in English.

While the presence of joik in Norwegian Eurovision was mentioned in Cocq and Dubois’s text, it is odd that the authors do not mention the contested aftermath of this song, as deranged versions of the joik were sung at Sámi people to harass them in Norway. The push-and-pull factors of gaining agency and visibility also brought with it unwelcomed side-effects which are still present in Scandinavian society today.

Having said that, I want to end by highlighting the parts of the book that are particularly interesting. Chapter 3 is a strong media-sensitive analysis and close-reading of a multimodal work made from the practice of combining image-making and poetry. Here, the authors show how Vakeapää’s *Beaivi ahcazan* (1989) is a product resulting from working with the concept of a book as a medium and what it is like to approach a book as raw material, part of the cultural products itself. Further on, the analyses of movies such as *Ofelas* (1987), *Sameblod* (2016), and *Kautokeino-opprøret* (2008) are a joy to read, and which are all beautifully written as well as informative mediations on Indigenous agency through the film as a medium. Here, the authors show their excellent grasp of film as a medium.

Likewise, the section on SámiNet (the first Sámi social media platform) and the use of social media which followed afterward, is an informative account of the road we have all traveled when it comes to the social media of the internet. Here, the same processes which moved the internet from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 also affected agencies of different groups and communities, as platforms became global corporations at the same time that our chief ways of communication became these platforms. A similar reflection on how this changed persons to users, and how a similar forum, Echo (for the east coast of the US), once thriving, became replaced by the Web 2.0 social media, can be found in *Lurker: How a Person Became a User*, by Joanne McNeil (2020). Reading Cocq and Dubois’s chapter in combination with McNeil’s work is an offhand recommendation I want to include in this review.

To conclude, the book is a useful resource when looking at specifics, especially SámiNet, and certain media products as examples of self-representation through different media. But the work as a whole lacks coherence. There are some insightful chapters in this book, but they are better as single contributions which stand alone as fantastic media artifacts. I predict the life of the book will be living as loose chapters on different curriculums, instead of as a complete work, well-read on someone’s shelf.

Perhaps there should have been two books: one focusing on important Sámi media artifacts related to Sámi agency and their circuits of distribution in shifting media ecologies and ecosystems, the other focusing on the use of social media for activism, and as communicative

media, part of the contemporary culture of the Sámi. Merging these two different ways of the contemporary post-digital life of Sámi today can be a challenge, as can be seen in this book.

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Works Cited:

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McNeil, Joanne. *Lurker: How a Person Became a User*. MCD, 2020.