Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia, vol. 58, no. 4, 2019, pp. 259–270.

ISSN: 1061-1959 (print)/ISSN 1558-092X (online)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/10611959.2019.1811564

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Radio and WhatsApp. Public Space among the Eastern Khanty and the Asiatic Yupik

The article focuses on the virtual public space created in Siberian Indigenous villages via WhatsApp chats and radio communication. These media are breaking boundaries and are creating a unique space for communication. I explore how these media form virtual public space and how they change everyday practices. Both practices create new public space, essential in the context of a lack of real public space.

Keywords: *Public space, media anthropology, digital anthropology, Arctic, Indigenous peoples*

Introduction

In Korliki (Khanty-Mansi Okrug, Western Siberia), virtual public space is formed on the basis of communication by radio. Hunters spend most of their time in the forest at a considerable distance from both the settlement and each other. Every day at a specified time, many villagers and their relatives speak on air with kin and colleagues in the

Fieldwork was carried out within the framework of the project "Private History and Ritual Dynamics in Coastal Chukotka" (Russian Science Foundation grant No. 19−78−00070, Principle Dmitriy Oparin).

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forest. Dialogues among individuals are heard by all, with people publicly discussing work-related and personal matters, passing on important information, and sharing their impressions of the day. These conversations are often in the Khanty language, while the language of the "real" public space in the village is exclusively Russian. We can thus see the formation of a unique public space via media that encompasses all the village inhabitants and the taiga hunters.

Among the Chukchi and Asiatic Yupik (Chukotka, the Siberian Far East), WhatsApp has recently become one of the main means of communication. There are nearly five chats that include almost all the villagers of Novoe Chaplino (Chukotka), Sireniki (Chukotka) and even St. Lawrence Island (Alaska). People communicate in four languages (Russian, Yupik, Chukchi, and English), share pictures and videos, and stay in touch almost 24 hours a day.

I explore here how these media form virtual public space and how they are changing everyday practices. There is one core difference between them: Radio interaction among the Khanty is necessary for hunting, while WhatsApp communication is voluntary and entertaining. Both practices create new public space essential in the context of a lack of real, physical public space.

This essay is written within the framework of the social anthropology of technology, digital anthropology, and media anthropology. Many studies have been dedicated to the technological innovations and novelties implemented in the everyday lives of the Indigenous Arctic population. Perti Pelto's (1987) well-known and controversial notion of the "snowmobile revolution"[1] later evolved into Florian Stammler's (2009) "mobile phone revolution." Other studies feature contemporary Indigenous media issues: Arctic cyberspace, social media, and various forms of social and artistic practices within the virtual public space, to name a few.[2] This research is focused not on the social consequences of a given technological innovation, but on the formation of public space via radio and the WhatsApp messenger application. This space is produced through the communication process and encompasses actors from various distant locations. It breaks geographical and social boundaries, uniting people and providing them with ample opportunities to speak out to the whole community and beyond. A unique space produced through two

means of communication and maintained by many individuals is the object of the present research.

Little anthropological research has been carried out that features radio among Northern reindeer herders and hunters. One relevant study focuses on the Inuit population in Nunavut, Canada. The anthropologist Jean Briggs (2000) describes a community radio program filled with different messages. The majority are practical and simply informational (for example meeting notices or safety warnings), but others are likely to have emotionally charged connotations for some listeners ("Johnny, come home, your dinner is ready"; "Michael, you are welcome to sleep and to eat here if you want to"). The messages are read by the bilingual Inuk host twice a day. This program is listened to religiously by the community audience in every household as well as in the land of hunting and fishing camps. Every personal or practical message is heard by the whole community. The author compares this media practice with a traditional Inuit song-duel. She argues that this practice diminishes confrontation and draws together the diverse and fragmented community.

The Khanty-Mansi Western Siberia Case

This Inuit practice can be compared with the Western Siberian experience in many ways. I conducted my fieldwork in Western Siberia among the Khanty in 2015. The fieldwork was carried out in Korliki, a settlement of nearly 500 people. The majority of the population are Khanty, though there are Russians, Tatars, Ukrainians, and Germans as well. Korliki is one of the few Khanty-Mansi settlements that remain remote from zones of gas and oil exploitation. I was present at many types of conversation via radio—in forest cabins when the local hunters and their relatives gathered around the table with a radio device, and in the settlement when some individuals visited owners of radio devices to pass on information to their relatives or friends in the forest. I recorded and transcribed all the conversations. After each radio session I asked those who took part to translate if they had used the Khanty language. I conducted 23 interviews with active users of the radio on this topic and took advantage of any opportunity to mention the radio and ask about the place of this technology in informants'

everyday lives. I have found no literature on the history of radio technology, though some information may be in local archives. All the historical information for this project was derived from the recollections of my older informants.[a]

Almost every family in Korliki possesses land in the taiga, with its own forest hunting camps. Many men and women are engaged in the traditional wildlife economy—hunting and reindeer herding in the taiga. Almost every taiga cabin is equipped with a radio transceiver. There are radio transceivers in several houses in the settlement of Korliki as well. Mobile phone coverage is too weak there and completely absent in the forest. Every day, throughout the year, all the hunters in the woods come on air for radio contact at 18:00 and 20:00. People in the village visit those with radio transceivers to communicate with hunters in the cabins. Some are able to connect to the hunters' radio transceivers by telephone. Thus, twice a day the vast territory encompassing the village and dozens of remote cabins in the forest is united in a communal conversation. In the case of distant cabins whose signal cannot reach the settlement, messages are passed on by hunters who are closer to the village.

Radio transceivers are used for various purposes. Most important is that if there is an accident or other emergency (for example a hunter breaks a leg), people will find out and help. First, a doctor comes on air, and then a helicopter is sent to the cabin from a local town. If someone fails to come on air for some time, this may mean that person has gotten lost or in trouble in the woods and nearby hunters begin a search.

Hunters inform their families and friends when they are coming to the settlement and what they need to be bought at the grocery store. The goods are then brought to the forest whenever someone is leaving the settlement. In October–November, hunters gather their reindeer, bring them closer to the cabin and hobble them with wood blocks. Radio connection is essential during this period, as hunters inform each other about the reindeers' locations. If any reindeer marked by an owner enters another hunter's territory, the hunter who sees it passes on the information about its location to the owner via radio:

> We communicate with each other. I am 20 km from my brother, Vasya is 23 km, Lyosha is 23 km away as well. If a reindeer appears, everybody knows whose animal it is – its ears are

> marked. You tell the owner over the radio; he comes and removes the reindeer. The radio really helps us during this time." (Male, 43, Korliki)

Hunters always discuss the weather, snow conditions, temperature, and any changes observed—a drop in temperature, thawing of the ice cover, and various signs indicating weather change. For example, one hunter announced on the radio that the top branches of the birches were turning red, a sign of a forthcoming drop in temperature. They do not (or try not to) inform everybody how many sables they have caught, but always share their everyday hunting stories. It is essential for the hunters to discuss their professional issues, to initiate "idle talk," as termed by the anthropologist Rane Willerslev (2011). Everyday storytelling is a traditional practice of sharing knowledge and "humanizing" hunters after a day spent searching for prey and encountering animals. They are creating a professional hunting space on the radio, sharing their experience with a large audience. Some hunters live alone in cabins for months at a time, so everyday communication with relatives and other hunters has a beneficial psychological purpose.

They use their own language full of terms and metaphors, jokes and hints that are understood by the rest. Humor is frequently expressed during hunting conversations by both men and women. Such jokes as "I saw a crocodile today in the forest" or "come for a disco party" are common in this space—a space that is not only practical and informative, but entertaining.

Radio space in the evenings is predominantly masculine. Hunters discuss the day, talking with their relatives in the settlement, looking for reindeer and informing everybody of their traveling plans and needs. Women's time is at noon:

> Who can she talk with in the forest? She switches the radio on and talks with somebody. All the men are hunting at 12 o'clock, so we, the women, can talk. We chat. Who's doing what. What do we talk about? I changed the bedding pads, for example, brought some snow, I'm going to wash the clothes, I'm sewing. We discuss how to sew. If I'm busy, I might make a date with my friend for a particular time. In the evenings we don't talk. That's the time for the men." (Female, 38, Korliki)

Conversations are often in the Khanty language, while the language of the "real" public space in the village is exclusively Russian. It is easier for hunters to discuss work-related hunting and reindeer issues in the Khanty language, sometimes using Russian words and phrases. Local hunting is considered a purely Khanty activity. They mock Russians for lack of skill in hunting, and are irritated by the barbaric hunting tourism popular among wealthy urban Russians.

Another reason for speaking in Khanty is that the Russian local police frequently listens to the radio conversations, looking for those who break the law, hunting moose or bears for example:

> People are saying that he'll look in the boiler soon. We've lived off nature for centuries. We will never take what we don't need. But if we show a Russian a place with an abundance of geese or crucian carp [Carassius carassius], he'll take everything. (Male, 33, Korliki)

A hunter is allowed to kill animals on his own territory, but he is not allowed to sell moose meat or bear fat, for example. Those who announce that they are bringing these prohibited products to the settlement are fined by the police. Many hunters secretly bring such goods at night. Of course, they try not to discuss this over the radio. They may just give a hint in the Khanty language. One hunter told me that sometimes the police officer listens to radio conversations with somebody who understands Khanty to monitor illegal hunting activity.

There is thus a secret language for various purposes. Sometimes a wife's interest in her husband's day is verbalized in innocent and formal greetings over the radio, though it has its own **implicit** emotional charge and hidden sense. Nobody ever says on air "I love you" or "Take care," as this private conversation is heard by the whole village and forest. Any formal phrase can have a hidden meaning, caught only by two people and missed by the rest of the audience. I once heard a death announcement whereby a sister told her brother in the forest that their father had died in the village. She couldn't reach her brother directly, so she transmitted a message via a different hunter, knowing that many were listening to the conversation. Her most tender and intimate phrase was "Do not worry. Natalia is coming from the city. How will you get to the village? The snow is melting, there is water everywhere." "Do not worry," considering the Khanty's reserved

radio manner, was emotional enough. The hunter who passed on the bad news simply said "Ivan, your father has died." A hunter who was listening to the conversation said, "Semyon, why did you say it so abruptly? You should have prepared him."

An old man who has a radio transceiver lives in a house close to a **residential** school for children whose parents hunt all year. They often come there to talk with their parents. Nobody in the village has ever taken money for letting others use a radio transceiver. Sometimes it is possible to call owners of a radio transceiver and ask them to pass information to someone in the forest.

Radio is so popular among the hunters that they switch it on even if they do not need to communicate anything. It has become a daily routine, a necessity to stay involved and in touch with forest and settlement news. Radio changes communication practices. Ten to fifteen years ago, when radio was less widespread, people used to visit more often. Now there is no need to travel to neighboring cabins as you can share all the news and discuss almost all questions at a set time every day. People have ceased visiting each other and there is less spontaneity in communication practices. The arrival of the hunter home from the forest has become expected and less spontaneous, and so less joyful.

The Far East Chukotka Case

The second case study concerns WhatsApp communication among the Indigenous peoples of coastal Chukotka, a region situated in Russia's Far East and inhabited mostly by Russians, Asiatic Yupik, and Chukchi. Most Asiatic Yupik live in Novoe Chaplino, Uelkal, and Sireniki. These coastal villages are called national Eskimo hamlets, and their inhabitants are thought to be predominantly Asiatic Yupik.[b] People there hunt walrus, whales, and seals, and work in the schools and administration, as well as commerce, municipal housing, and communal services. Coastal Chukotka is close to Alaska's St. Lawrence Island, also inhabited by Yupik who speak the same language and are relatives of the Chukotka natives. There are Asiatic Yupik living in other Chukotka settlements as well as in the city of Anadyr, the regional capital. Some Yupik have moved to Siberian and Central Russian cities and St. Petersburg.

One of the main means of keeping in touch is WhatsApp, which appeared in coastal Chukotka several years ago and has become very popular among the natives. There are over five chats encompassing almost all the villagers of Novoe Chaplino, Sireniki, and even St. Lawrence Island, along with individuals who live in other parts of Russia. People communicate in four languages (Russian, Yupik, Chukchi, and English), share pictures and videos, and stay in touch almost 24 hours a day. This was the first time I conducted social media fieldwork in a digitally mediated social context.[3] I had conducted previous fieldwork in Chukotka in 2011 and 2012 but in this case I was outside the region in question (Oparin 2012). For over a year, I followed the constantly updated chat conversations on WhatsApp. When I was added to the chat, I greeted everybody. People returned the greeting, some asking who I was. Those who knew me told them. Afterward I refrained from joining in the chat or commenting on their messages and images.

I focus here on the group chat called *Tasig'mit*, translated from Central Siberian Yupik as "dwellers of the Tasig settlement." This is the Yupik name of Novoe Chaplino, the largest present-day Asiatic Yupik settlement. The initial purpose of this chat was to preserve the language; it was launched as a Yupik-only medium. Now nearly 60 percent of the messages are written in Russian. The linguistic situation among Asiatic Yupik in coastal Chukotka is complex (Morgounova-Schwalbe 2015). Almost no exclusively Yupik-speaking environment remains; nearly everyone uses Russian in the public and private spheres. People complain about language loss; some launch fragile and short-lived projects to improve the situation. Lamentations over language loss, the decline of traditional culture, and the forgetting of rituals constitute everyday discourse in many Siberian Indigenous societies.[c]

Over 100 Yupik participate in the *Tasig'mit* chat, from Chukotka as well as Alaska and other parts of Russia. Most messages offer congratulations on holidays and birthdays. People send pictures and copy Russian poems from the Internet. There are messages in Yupik from knowledgeable middle-aged Yupik women, who are sometimes asked to write in both languages to help others learn. Even those with a poor knowledge of the language try to use Yupik words. Nearly everyone begins their messages with the Yupik greeting *K'uyakamsi*

k'amakhl'yusi (Hello everybody!) and continues in Russian. Younger participants ask their relatives to translate their messages from Russian so they can post in Yupik. People often discuss Yupik-related themes. They post pictures of local art, hunting or fishing photos, and videos of ethnic dances and songs. In summer, the chat is filled with vacation photos.

Sometimes people post personal messages that are seen by the whole chat audience. Recently, a mother used Yupik to wish her fluent Yupik-speaking daughter good luck in her exams. There is some element of performativity in this communication. The mother wants her relationship with her daughter to be observed by everybody; moreover, she is proud about her Yupik fluency and conveys that her daughter is sitting exams. This is comparable to the Inuit radio messages through which a large audience observes private relations, discussed earlier.

Conclusions

In this article I compare two communication practices of two mutually distant Siberian Indigenous peoples—Asiatic Yupik and Eastern Khanty. Both practices are practical and entertaining, based on different technologies and uniting relatively large groups of people who know each other in virtual and actual spaces. It is appropriate to comment on the culturally articulated nature of these practices, noting especially that local languages are used and local issues are discussed.

In the Khanty case, oral communication and the use of the native language is far more intense than in the Yupik example. The Yupik case involves communication performed textually; although the group was initially intended to promote and preserve the Yupik language, actual use of the native language on this platform is very limited. It is obvious that the Eastern Khanty language is more widespread in its respective region, with a much higher general level of fluency than seen for the Yupik language in Chukotka. Moreover, the Eastern Khanty language is useful and even necessary for adequate discussion on wildlife management topics. This is why free oral expression is characteristic of the Khanty case. The far more reserved and limited Yupik-language knowledge of Chukotka natives makes it more suited for literary expression. In Chukotka, people are more comfortable taking time to consult elders or even dictionaries in order to participate

in the dialogue. It is important to note that the different nature of oral and text-based communication requires a different temporality and presupposes different conversation rhythms. At the same time, the WhatsApp chats involve a greater variety of expressions of local Indigenous identity. Indigenous dialogue is not limited to the native language, and can be carried out in Russian, in a linguistic mix, or in local slang, as well as via pictures, videos, and memes, all while remaining Indigenous in its social nature.

Significantly, a lack of "real" public space in post-Soviet Siberian aboriginal settlements is palpable. People have nowhere to go, but they still have a need to meet somewhere beyond the little world of each household and family. There is almost no venue for interaction between settlement inhabitants. Moreover, public space among the Eastern Khanty and Asiatic Yupik is predominately Russian-speaking. Virtual public space created by radio and online communication is ethnic in character, and more native-language-oriented than, say, the school or the shop. It breaks social and geographical boundaries, unites the people of the settlement, and solves various practical and emotional issues. There is still much to explore within this subject. This is a preliminary approach to the Indigenous virtual public space that is creating new forms of interaction, has its own rules, and influences the everyday practices of the people involved.

Notes

1. Compare Pelto (1987) and Helander-Renvall (2007).
2. Compare Christensen (2003); Alexander (2009); and Wachowich and Scobie (2010).
3. The term comes from Markham (2013) and Boellstorff (2012). See Oparin (2012).

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Editor's Notes

a. For background on Indigenous peoples of West Siberia, see Andrei Golovnev, *Govoriashchie Kul'tury: traditsii Samodiitsev i Ugrov.* (Ekaterinburg: Akademiia Nauk, 1995); Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, *The Tenacity of Ethnicity: A Siberian Saga in Global Perspective*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); and N. I. Novikova and D. Funk, eds., *Sever i Severiane: Sovremennoe polozhenie Korennykh malochisklennykh Narodov Severa, Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka*. (Moscow: Akademii Nauka, 2012).

b. For background on the Chukchi and Yup'ik of Chukotka, see Anna Kertulla, *Antler on the Sea: The Yup'ik and Chukchi of the Russian Far East*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); and the work of Nikolai Vakhtin.

For perspective on changes in telecommunication, aviation, space and personhood, see Piers Vitebsky and Anatoly Alekseyev, "Velocity and Purpose among Reindeer Herders in the Verkhoyansk Mountains," *Inner Asia*, 2020, Vol. 22, pp. 28-48.

c. On Indigenous language viability, see Nikolai Vakhtin, "Iazyki Narodov Severo-Vostoka Sibiri. Sovremennaia situatsiia," *Narody Severo-vostoka Sibiri*, E. P. Batianova, V. A. Turaev, eds., 19-32. (Moscow: Nauka, 2009); Olga Ulturgashaeva, *Narrating the Future in Siberia: Childhood, Adolescence and Autobiography among the Eveny.* (New York: Berghahn, 2012); Lenore A. Grenoble, "Language Revitalization," *The Oxford Handbook of Sociolinguistics*, eds. R. Bayley, C. Cameron, and C. Lucas, 792-811. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Akulina Mestnikova "Civilian Initiatives of

Indigenous Peoples in the Sphere of Language Policy." *Sibirica* 2018, Vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 83-91. A relevant conference on languages of Indigenous peoples of the Arctic was announced in 2019: https://spbu.ru/news-events/calendar/novye-puti-sohraneniya-yazykov-korennyh-narodov-arktiki-obsudyat-na-kulturnom.