

# The Political Economy of Arctic Reality Television: The Spatial Communication of *Ice Road Truckers* & *Deadliest Catch*

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*Transformative technological, environmental, and political events in recent years have converged to emphasize a turn to spatialization within the study of media and communication, in particular within studies of the political economy of media. The Arctic, as a global region denoted by economic growth, ecological transformation, and increasingly dynamic international politics, presents a natural focal point for the impact of spatial media. This study examines both History Channel's reality television program Ice Road Truckers and its Discovery Channel counterpart Deadliest Catch, including the programs' histories and their implicit or direct roles in influencing discourse about the Arctic and sub-Arctic's economy and ecology. How do these programs articulate a discourse about the North American Arctic for a mass audience, and how does this discourse relate to real-world ecological and economic conditions of the region?*

The 10-year anniversary of History Channel's hit reality television program *Ice Road Truckers* provides opportunity for renewed reflection on the relationship between global media, their audiences, and policymaking in the Arctic. In the summer of 2016, History crowed about its forthcoming "landmark tenth season" for the program—which features long-haul truckers driving rigs over frozen lakes and rivers to remote resource extraction sites in Canada's far north as well as Alaska (Wray, 2016). Just three months previous, Canada's federal government had announced the 2017 completion of an all-vehicles highway connecting Inuvik to Tuktoyaktuk—the same winter route travelled in previous seasons of *Ice Road Truckers*. It would allow ordinary drivers to reach the Arctic Ocean for the first time (Hume, 2016).

This study examines both History's *Ice Road Truckers* and its Discovery Channel reality television counterpart *Deadliest Catch*, including the programs' histories and their implicit or direct roles in influencing discourse about the Arctic and sub-Arctic's economy and ecology. How do these programs articulate a discourse about the North American Arctic for a mass audience, and how does this discourse relate to real-world ecological and economic conditions of the region? The parallel trajectories of media and technology/transportation in overcoming Arctic geographies

conjure up Canadian historian and communication theorist Harold Innis's conceptualization of spatialization and international communication.

The role of spatialization looms especially large in the Arctic, where media play a substantial role in communicating from—and about—the region to the rest of the world. Having emerged as a crossroads of globalization, resources extraction, and environmental protection/degradation, reality television programs like *Ice Road Truckers* and *Deadliest Catch* highlight the region's economic potential through the commodification of natural resources to a global television audience. They simultaneously romanticize and commodify the North American Arctic, transmitting images of frontier adventures, conflicts, and resource extraction activities into households across the continent and internationally. To this end, the North American Arctic's best-known reality television programs present a compelling case study for the production and impact of spatial communication.

### **Spatialization: The Role of Media and Technology**

Transformative technological, environmental, and political events in recent years have converged to emphasize a turn to spatialization within the study of media and communication, in particular within studies of the political economy of media. Understood as a sustained effort to establish connections between media, time, space, and structures of power (Mosco, 1996), spatialization would appear to enjoy an outsized influence in remote, isolated, or frontier geographies. The Arctic, as an international geographic region impacted by economic growth, ecological transformation, and increasingly dynamic international politics, presents a natural focal point for the impact of spatial communication. The mediation of territorial disputes between Arctic nation-states, as well as communication emanating from governance bodies such as the Arctic Council, are but two examples of the role of media in disseminating Arctic information over space and time.

While the term spatialization was coined by social theorist Henri Lefebvre in 1979 to denote the overcoming of space and time in social life, it was Harold Innis who decades earlier adjoined the concept to media and communication (Mosco, 1996: 173). Innis' early interest in spatial logistics is reflected in his PhD thesis at the University of Chicago, devoted to the formation of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and his subsequent staples thesis, highlighting the foundational role of hard commodities and resources extraction activities in society. Later, in his book *Empire & Communications* (1950), Innis put forth his venerable time and space theory, establishing himself as a forerunner in the study of international communication. Within this framework, time-based media—including clay or stone tablets, manuscripts copied on parchment, or oral communication such as poems—carried traditions and rituals over time and generations, favoring stability, community, and tradition. Conversely, space-based media—which convey information to many people over long distances, but have shorter exposure times—facilitate rapid change, materialism, and empire. Applying the framework to ancient civilizations, he showed how an imbalance between these two propositions could precipitate chaos, conflict, inequality, and war (Innis, 1950).

Other scholars have built upon Marx's explanation of "the annihilation of space by time" to similarly connect rapid technological change and economic growth associated with modern capitalism to massive changes in the conceptions of space and time (Harvey, 1990). Spatialization provides media companies with new opportunities for content dissemination and relating hitherto separated audiences and geographies. The parallels between global media and transportation systems are important to note, and often work in tandem to shape political and economic

institutions (Innis, 1980). Both transportation and communication are utilized by capitalism to minimize the time it takes “to move goods, people and messages over space, thereby diminishing the significance of spatial distance as a constraint on the expansion of capital markets” (Mosco, 1996).

Barnes (2005) argues that the space- and time-based properties of communication postulated by Innis can be found within the commodities themselves, thus situating spatialization as an approach to understanding the global dimensions of communication technologies but also the staples that underpin it. Connecting space-time biases of resources to Marx’s idea of commodity fetishism, he highlights the importance of recognizing the commodity’s social relations if it is to be fully understood. Each staple or resource embodies a spatial or temporal imperative—a “space-time bias”—that is realized with the advent of its extraction or trade.

Staples such as fish, lumber, or minerals also drive a wedge between the economic interests of wealthier core regions and those of periphery geographies, where such staples are abundant. This metropolitan/hinterlands dualism has been attributed to Innis as an effort to resist “the dominant and myopic paradigms in research set by metropolitan institutions and intellectuals” (Watson, 1977: 45). Notably, Innis’s approach was borne of a mindset of Canada’s resource economics: “He was a colonial intellectual, constantly struggling to overthrow the yoke of European habits of mind in order to present a made-in-Canada interpretation of his country’s history and development... he constantly tried to break out of the rut of colonial thinking, and to think new thoughts relevant to his own time and place” (Barnes, 2005). Later in his career, Innis set out to lead the University of Toronto’s 1944 Arctic Survey—seen as a major milestone in the advent of northern studies in Canada. The project was seen as something of a disappointment, as it was saddled with competing national agendas (from Canada and the United States) and a variety of research topics, but it furthered Innis’s interest in communication (Evenden, 1998). Innis was arguably the first communication scholar, and certainly the most visible social scientist, to align the future of the Arctic and a broader sense of ‘nordicity’ with the advancing roles of technology and media in daily life.

Studies of spatialization within the political economy of communication paradigm are not universally embraced by media studies scholars, however. Some understandings of the framework are argued to focus too extensively on media concentration as an extension of institutional power, all the while ignoring the rapid, complex changes wrought more broadly by globalization—in part because the literature has failed to keep pace (Hackett, 2000). There is merit to such criticism, particularly in consideration of this study’s focus on a unique electronic media format. The proliferating genre of reality-based television programs dealing with North America’s Arctic and sub-Arctic presents new challenges for the communication scholar. Such programs are at once technological phenomena—transmitting powerful images and soundscapes of the region to millions of households across the continent and the world—yet at the same time they produce a specific form of media content arising from particular political, economic, and ecological worldviews and real conditions. The mediating effects of such programs, then, are to be found within the electronic medium of television (and similarly diffused electronic media), but also within the specific information and plotlines presented in this sub-genre of reality-based shows, themselves predicated on Arctic and sub-Arctic resource industries and extractive activities such as fishing and mining.

One avenue forward comes from Innis's University of Toronto colleague Marshall McLuhan, whose media research was deeply influenced by Innis's writings on the properties of various media throughout history. McLuhan's own conceptualization of spatial communication was based upon Innis's time-versus-space dualism, but also incorporated advances in electronic media to foster an understanding of such media spaces as "processual, dynamic, and relational" (Cavell, 1999). Inherent within McLuhan's understanding of electronic communication was the relationship between what was communicated and the context in which it was communicated:

Given that electronic media allowed for instant communication, communication took on an iconic quality, with communication taking place all at once, spatially, rather than in a linear fashion. By theorizing the context of communication, McLuhan was able to develop a theory of communication sensitive to the social and material emplotments of communications (Cavell, 1999).

Such a view aligns with but also builds upon Innis's original spatialization project, what Barnes describes as the recouping of both "the interesting spatial and temporal relations submerged within" understandings of the natural resource, as well as the "multifarious and twisted threads of its far-reaching geography and history" (2005: 112). Here too, McLuhan's interest in parsing out the attributes of various media forms is grounded in Innis's earlier work. For Innis, electronic media such as the telephone and radio were biased toward space because they overcame the barriers of large distances and remote geographies.

Among international geographies, the role of spatialization may be especially pronounced in the Arctic. International news media have been increasingly active in relaying the region's ecological story—particularly around climate change (Christensen, 2013)—as well as the geopolitical race for natural resources, including energy (Øverland, 2010). However, it is television entertainment programming that promises viewers a weekly recurring ensemble of cast members and narratives dealing with the ecology and economy of the North American Arctic. In turn, producers are rewarded with substantive audiences, both nationally and abroad. To put this in perspective, on May 16, 2017, *Deadliest Catch* enjoyed a television rating in the U.S. that bested any of the prime time offerings from major cable news networks, including *CNN*, *MSNBC*, and *Fox News* (Welch, 2017).

Given the relatively long-term success of *Ice Road Truckers* and *Deadliest Catch*, it is helpful to understand, in the spirit of McLuhan, both what these shows communicate but also the context in which they are communicated. *Ice Road Truckers* notably introduces television viewers across North America and the world to a form of long-haul truck transport that daringly crosses frozen lakes and rivers in order to haul supplies and commodities to diamond, gold, and oil sites in some of the continent's most northerly and isolated reaches. Similarly, *Deadliest Catch* is premised upon the dangers associated with nautical transport and resource extraction in the profitable fisheries of the Bering Sea. On the quest for Alaskan king or Opilio crab, fishermen regularly haul in millions of dollars' worth of the ocean commodity. Deck hands risk their lives in this perilous line of work—a fact not lost on transfixed viewers, who have made it one of Discovery's flagship television programs. These programs, for their millions of viewers watching at home, articulate a distinct message about social, economic, and ecological conditions in the North American Arctic. In doing so, they continue a longstanding tradition of historic constructions within popular culture about the Arctic as both a frontier and a site of struggle between humankind and nature.

### ***Deadliest Catch: Cowboys of the Bering Sea***

One of the first, and best-known, reality television programs depicting working life in the North is *Deadliest Catch*, which has aired on the Discovery Channel since 2005 and is broadcast in more than 200 countries. It has garnered attention from a wide range of scholarly camps, including management scholars, who have compared leadership styles of fishing boat captains to the financial success of their vessels (Covey & Ewell, 2015). Others have interpreted the program through the lens of hegemonic and working-class masculinities (Blair, 2013; Kirby, 2013; Buchanan, 2014) or as a case of labor versus capital—a class struggle rooted in “expropriation and proletarianization” involving both manual labor (the crab fishermen) and the skilled, creative labor of television workers (Wells, 2015).

The program has proven to be one of Discovery’s biggest hits, and at the same time is credited with helping to usher in the current proliferation of Alaska reality television programs. It is a prime example of media-articulated spatialization depicting both the overcoming of oceanic space and a dominance over nature. During the show, a radar tracker regular alerts viewers to where the competing fishing vessels are located in the Bering Sea as they seek out optimal conditions for seasonal crabbing. The same program keeps track of the financial valuation of each boat’s haul of crab. Here, *Deadliest Catch* is notable for its mediation of the Alaska crab fishery, including its labor and economic practices.

The program also provides viewers with a first-hand perspective of what life is like on the Bering Sea for the state’s crab fishermen. Deck hands featured on the program are no ordinary reality television stars. They endure rogue waves, freezing temperatures, sea sickness, and highly dangerous working conditions—in addition to interpersonal conflicts and personal struggles. Polar conditions are situated prominently in the program, as deckhands regularly fight off the accumulation of ice on the boats. Ice packs that form at sea can also trap vessels, posing an ongoing challenge for their captains. These boats—with names like the Northwestern, Cornelia Marie, and Time Bandit—are navigated through some of the most dangerous fishing waters in the world. The tragic Bering Sea sinking of the fishing vessel *Destination* on February 11, 2017 off of St. George Island, taking the lives of six crew members, is but one reminder of this reality. Both the dangers and demanding working conditions inherent within this line of work are rationalized by handsome paydays—at least when the crab boats are successful. A season of Alaskan king or opilio crab fishing can net millions of dollars for a boat, and tens of thousands of dollars in income for deck hands. To compensate for the daunting weather and dispiriting working conditions that crew members regularly face, financial compensation therefore takes on a heightened salience. The knowledge of a big payday allows crew members to enjoy (along with their viewers) some maritime camaraderie and the euphoria associated with a big catch.

A more recent challenge for the show’s participants, however, has come in the way of climate change. Increasingly, the program’s participants have emerged as high-profile spokespersons on issues of Arctic ecology and climate. At a 2017 climate forum hosted by CNN and featuring Al Gore, the former vice president was engaged by crab fisherman Keith Colburn, captain of the program’s *Wizard* vessel, on how climate change is impacting the Alaska fishery. Furthermore, during the program’s 13<sup>th</sup> season, the fishing boats of *Deadliest Catch* confronted the reality of warming oceans—rendering traditional fishing grounds unproductive and decades-old maritime

expertise obsolete. Some captains decided to venture into colder, deeper waters—often unchartered territories—while others stuck to conventional grounds. In either scenario, there is more drama for viewers at home. Underlying workplace conditions remain intact: Crew members still deal with physical injuries, anxiety, conflict, and isolation. Climate change has merely raised the stakes.

This narrative formula has allowed the program to “carve out a distinguished place in the history of U.S. maritime storytelling” while juxtaposing “extreme danger with cowboy-style free enterprise, bravado and macho sentimentality” (Blundell, 2017: paras. 2 and 4). In spite of this master frame of frontier heroics, the program is not immune from the ecological impacts of a warming planet. Here, reality TV is positioned to diffuse a message of climate change even when its audience is not universally friendly to the message’s implied politics. Yet the interplay between a healthy fishery and climate change mitigation is obvious for the show’s fans:

Unlike so much reality TV, it is a show for looking at, not looking through, and at times it’s as though you are inside an epic contemporary adventure novel. Let’s hope those intrepid sailor cowboys can find those crabs, though, before the waters start to boil (Blundell, 2017: para. 18).

*Deadliest Catch* isn’t alone in mediating a recent message about the concrete impacts of global climate change amid a bigger picture of resources extraction. Its History Channel counterpart is also contending with the confluence of changing weather and traditional economic activities in the North American Arctic.

### ***Ice Road Truckers: The Arctic’s Road Warriors***

A coalescing of Arctic transport, supply chain management, and regional ecology, the 2007 launch of *Ice Road Truckers* represented a milestone for the then 12-year old *History Channel* in more ways than one. With 3.4 million viewers watching the premiere episode, the program’s debut became the most-watched original telecast in the channel’s history; and its most successful original program (Rogers & Rocchio, 2007). Produced by Thom Beers, who also produces *Deadliest Catch*, the program features long-haul truck drivers who traverse the North American Arctic’s wild frontiers in white knuckle fashion—most notably over frozen lakes—while delivering cargo and infrastructure to mining sites and other resource extraction operations. *Ice Road Truckers* holds the distinction of filming in two countries—in addition to the U.S. state of Alaska it has also filmed in the Canadian territories of the Yukon and Northwest Territories, and the provinces of British Columbia and Manitoba. Following its focus on Canada’s North in seasons one and two, the program sets its sights on Alaska starting in season three. From Anchorage, the seasoned polar route truckers head out to Fairbanks, Coldfoot, Deadhorse, and the oilfields of Prudhoe Bay. They drive over frozen rivers and swamps to reach the communities of Bettles and Nuiqsut. More recent seasons have seen the ice road trucking action return to Canada.

Like *Deadliest Catch*, *Ice Road Truckers* has come under much scrutiny for its representations of masculinity and the working class (Fleras & Dixon, 2011) as well as the tensions inherent in depicting blue-collar work within the larger economy of corporate networks, audience demographics, television advertising, and existing conceptions of class structure and class consciousness (Sullivan, 2011). Similarly, Blair (2013) situates programs like *Ice Road Truckers* as a continuation of the masculine hero depictions found in mythology and entertainment—emphasizing discourses of heroics but also working-class tribulations.

The approach to the program's 10-year anniversary in 2016 occurred during discussions in Canada about the completion of the Inuvik Tuktoyaktuk Highway—a 137 km raised roadbed built atop permafrost and traversing a landscape dotted with thousands of lakes and streams. The road is described as bringing “new opportunities and new stresses to the North by opening a small, isolated community to the outside world” (Hume, 2016: para. 5). It also follows the same route as one of the ice roads featured in the TV program—a fact well-publicized by Canada's national media outlets. In spite of some detractors, the highway has well placed supporters, including former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who was described as seeing the highway in terms of both Arctic sovereignty and as a “road to resources.” This aligns with the view of the highway being symbolically much more significant than merely a gravel roadway. Rather, it is the first year-round road connecting Canada's Arctic coastline to the rest of the country (O'Connor, 2016). Polar highway boosterism also comes from those tasked with tourism promotion in the region. As a marketing manager for the Yukon government eloquently noted, “interest in getting to the end of the road and dipping your toe in the Arctic Ocean will be high” (Hume, 2016: para. 29).

The increased prominence of all-season land roads corresponds with the television program's engagement with climate change—creating environmental and weather problems in the North, but also impacting the way of life for the ice road's drivers. According to a promotional statement from History, the truckers “may have finally met their match, as global warming and El Niño are creating a winter like no other before...expected record warm temperatures will create a worst-case scenario resulting in a winter road season so short that there won't be enough time to deliver all the supplies to the communities” (History, 2017: para. 2). With Canada's network of 3,300-plus ice roads becoming increasingly unreliable, thanks in part to warming autumns and thinner natural lake ice, pressure is mounting to build all-season roads at a cost of \$450,000 per mile (Levin, 2017). *Ice Road Truckers* has provided a popular entry point for Canadians, and a larger audience interested in the North American Arctic, to enter such discussions about the ongoing viability of ice roads and their post-climate change all-season alternatives. At the same time, the dangers associated with less reliable ice roads creates a greater degree of risk for drivers. Like *Deadliest Catch*, climate change impacts the material conditions in which *Ice Road Truckers* is produced and televised, but it also raises the stakes within the mediated drama itself.

### **Spatial Mediation, Audiences, and the Reality of Arctic Television**

Both *Ice Road Truckers* and *Deadliest Catch* are emblematic of the new ways in which the Arctic is communicated to popular audiences in North America and globally. The showcasing of dramatic natural imagery, alongside the heroics emanating from the shows' protagonists, situates this genre of reality television as a unique medium—one that stands in for a larger set of economic and ecological issues related to the Arctic. These include the role of ongoing natural resources extraction—which is situated as the end goal for the transport adventures on the Bering Sea or the ice roads of the North. Industries such as fishing, mining, and energy are depicted as lifeblood to communities and workers—and the chief objectives for the dangerous expeditions which are central to the programs' narratives. They also include the role of dangerous work on the Arctic frontier, and how these labor practices intersect with local economies and geographies.

At the same time, these entertainment programs, and the industrial work they promote, are implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) aware of the central role of the natural world to their existence. In the past year, the issue of climate change has become particularly salient in both programs—and the ecological perils associated with a warming Arctic are not merely mediated as fact, they actually change the direction of the shows' narratives and provoke commentary from program cast members. This happens during the show but also within a larger public sphere. Thus, while this genre of Arctic reality television continues to endorse a form of capitalism that draws immediate value from ecological exploitation, it also communicates a message about the fragile condition of the region's ecology, the foundation for such economic activity. Given the longstanding popularity of both programs, such seemingly contradictory messages embedded into the shows have significant implications for public opinion and by extension region-specific environmental and social policies.

Insight here comes from Moore (2007) who provides a theory of capitalism as world ecology, a perspective that connects the accumulation of capital to the production of nature: "Capitalism does not act upon nature so much as develop through nature-society relations" (2). While such contradictions are embedded in the production of these programs, they also exist within the narrative structures of the shows themselves. In her examination of *Ice Road Truckers*' third season, Schell (2012) turns to the concept of the technological sublime to highlight how the rhetoric of the technological (the technology underpinning both ice roads and the vehicles traversing them) and natural (the Arctic's pristine environment) can co-exist. The same argument can be extended to the adventures of *Deadliest Catch* vessels like the *Time Bandit* or *Cornelia Maria*—nautical marvels in terms of the conditions they can survive—on the Bering Sea. Such a paradoxical storytelling strategy is optimal for maximizing television audiences, because it advances a pro-industrial stance without dismissing the appeals of environmental conservation. Its environmental politics, then, are open to interpretation.

For viewers outside of the North, the usage of contradictory aesthetics and a "hyperbolic language of fear" reinforces existing notions of Alaska and the North as "equally fascinating and forbidding" (Schell, 2012: 135) and "an especially beautiful and adverse environment in which to live and work" (138). Robe (2015) picks up on these themes of spectacle and contradiction within depictions of nature in reality television. Referring to the *Deadliest Catch*'s spawning of newer programs like Animal Planet's *Whale Wars*, he underscores the medium's ability to simultaneously promote and undermine wildlife conservation campaigns: "Media coverage serves not as a byproduct of such activism but as a key ingredient in organizing it, popularizing its message" (para. 6).

Yet the same cannot be said for representations of Indigenous communities in the North American Arctic television genre—*Ice Road Truckers* and *Deadliest Catch* included. Most of these programs have not adequately grappled with issues facing Indigenous peoples in the regions where they operate. There have been exceptions. At least one fictionalized, non-reality television program produced by Canada's national broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, attempted to bridge this gap. The drama *Arctic Air*, which aired for two years between 2012 and 2014, combined the heroism of Canada's tradition of bush pilots and Arctic aviation with representations of Indigenous peoples and communities. While innovative for depicting the North as a place where people live, and for featuring Indigenous people as protagonists, the show still contributed to a normalization of resources development and extraction (Hulan, 2016). This adds to the critiques of many revolving around these television programs, reality or otherwise—in terms of their contested representations

of social relations and ecologies, and their ultimate influence on wider public perceptions of the Arctic.

Television programs depicting mastery of rugged geographies and environmental spaces are not unique to the Arctic. Yet no other region has attracted the same degree of attention or the sheer number of reality programs. In Alaska alone, there have been well over 20 such programs—with titles such as *Alaska Bush People*, *Bering Sea Gold*, *Gold Rush*, and *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. The proliferation of these programs has been attributed in part to tax credits aimed at attracting Hollywood movie studios to the state and the initial success of *Deadliest Catch*. The rush to production has not been universally embraced, however. An editorial from the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* lamented both the “oversimplifications and distortions of reality shows (that) have rubbed many residents the wrong way” and the tendency of some of these television stars “to play fast and loose with Alaska’s laws” (2014: para. 4). The latter includes cast members from *Alaskan Bush People* fraudulently receiving \$20,000 in dividend checks from Alaska’s Permanent Fund, which is funded by state oil revenues, while they lived out-of-state. These programs are thus not immune from negative publicity in their own jurisdictions.

Despite these well-documented blemishes, the allure of television programs about Arctic geographies remains, for producers and audiences. The most successful of these shows enjoy an ongoing popularity with audiences—even in the North. As one correspondent noted in her travel diary of Alaska’s Dalton Highway, programs like *Ice Road Truckers* have “immortalized” ice road drivers as local legends (Duin, 2016). Reality television not only influences the way the North is understood from the outside and from afar—it allows communities in the North American Arctic to see themselves and their ecologies through the dramatic narratives of the genre. The same can be said of *Deadliest Catch*. Some regional critics accuse the program of both sensationalizing the Bering Sea crab fishery and spawning a wave of less successful reality shows about Alaska. Yet a study of American television viewing habits shows that *Deadliest Catch*’s strongest viewership lies in, perhaps counterintuitively, Alaska. As viewers cluster themselves into “cultural bubbles,” even viewers in the North show preferences favoring programs about their geographies and social organization (Katz, 2016)—grumbings of overwrought storylines notwithstanding.

The popularity of such shows has even translated into rethinking tourism in the North. One Alaska-based *Ice Roads Truckers*-themed attraction for tourists included a fully-guided tour of the Port of Anchorage, where fans of the program could see where and how cargo arrives before being loaded onto ice roads-ready vehicles. Nearby, at the Carlile Transportation trucking yard in Anchorage, they could climb into a Class 8 sleeper truck or enjoy a 10-minute ice-road simulator experience, including navigating the Dalton Highway in white-out conditions. Much of this mirrors the *Deadliest Catch*’s spin-off tourist attraction in the same state: The Bering Sea Crab Fisherman’s Tour. The tourist package promises all of the thrills of crab fishing without the perils of open sea marine transport, and the opportunity “to marvel at the variety of marine creatures caught in barrel pots and hauled up on deck” (Viator, 2017: para. 1).

At least one other indicator highlights the integration of reality television into Alaska’s economy and cultural life: The *Alaska Dispatch News* employs a reporter devoted to Alaska’s reality television landscape, including reality TV star sightings in cities such as Anchorage and Fairbanks. Perhaps this is a culmination of the fascination in popular media artifacts hailing from the North. The interplay of popular culture with life in the Arctic, along with ensuing fandom, is nothing new. Jack

Krakauer's best-selling 1996 book *Into the Wild*, about one man's existentialist trek into the Alaska backcountry, has since turned into a Hollywood production and has gained an international following. Even a young Harold Innis was captivated by Jack London's book *Call of the Wild*, inspiring the scholar's first expedition to the Arctic in the early 1920s (Evenden, 1998). Yet the meteoric rise of *Deadliest Catch* and *Ice Road Truckers* during the past decade, and the many like-minded shows that have attempted to follow their success, is perhaps the most visible pop culture milestone for Arctic media to date.

The enduring role of popular culture in communicating the North American Arctic should not be understated. As both television programs pass milestones of their own in recent years—the 100<sup>th</sup> episode for *Deadliest Catch*, and a 10-year anniversary for *Ice Road Truckers*—it becomes evident that both have transcended the genre of novel reality television programming. They have emerged as influential media franchises that have lifted up their respective networks but also a style of television programming that marries economy, working life, and renderings of Arctic ecology as final frontier. The sociological ramifications of such programs—including specific representations of identity and labor within the shows—have captured the strongest interest from the scholarly community. Yet the materiality of such entertainment programming is surprisingly often overlooked—even as staples emerge as the focal point of the shows and the engine of their production. The narratives of both programs are dependent on the extraction of resources such as fishing or mining as a catalyst for these labor practices. They are also dependent upon the ecological conduits to such economic activities—the nautical routes of the Bering Sea, or the far north's winter ice roads sending trucks to remote communities and work sites.

In this sense, these programs bring Innis's conceptualization of space-based communication full circle. They utilize electronic media to transcend geography and distance. They are a function of staples such as precious metals or the crab fishery, and yet they also influence their future by shifting perceptions about the ecology of the Arctic and the long-term sustainability of these resources. They set the stage for mainstream consideration, or even promotion, of the all-vehicles highway connecting Inuvik to Tuktoyaktuk. Finally, they are a manifestation of Innis's vision of the far north as a colonial outpost, or at least an environmental periphery, at the mercy of central institutions such as banks, governments, and even television studios located in the metropolitan core. In spite of popular assertions to the contrary, reality television is grounded in its own reality.

And yet to fully account for the political economy that these reality programs help to both represent and create for the Arctic, it is useful to draw also from Innis's colleague Marshall McLuhan. Critical to understanding the significance of both shows lies not only in what is transmitted within these programs, but also the contexts in which they are communicated—including regional industry, community, history, and geography. McLuhan's interpretation of electronic media as simultaneously spatial and iconic helps account for not only the way it influences the perceptions of audiences at home, but how such communication cycles back to real-world conditions. As the navigators of potentially treacherous ice roads and nautical passages conquer the Arctic's geography and transform themselves into frontier heroes, their overriding message about the Arctic's ecology and economy resonates across a different kind of space to a global audience of millions. It would be unwise to dismiss these programs, then, as anything but an integral part of discourse about the region and its future.

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