

## ***Starting Fire with Gunpowder* revisited: Inuktitut New Media content creation in the Canadian Arctic**

## ***Starting Fire with Gunpowder* revisité: création de nouveaux médias en inuktitut dans l'Arctique canadien**

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### Résumé de l'article

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# *Starting Fire with Gunpowder* revisited: Inuktitut New Media content creation in the Canadian Arctic

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Timothy J. Pasch\*

**Résumé:** *Starting Fire with Gunpowder* revisité: création de nouveaux médias en inuktitut dans l'Arctique canadien

En 1991 fut produit le documentaire canadien *Starting Fire with Gunpowder*, dont le sujet était l'histoire des premières productions médiatiques de l'Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC). Il examinait comment la création d'un contenu en inuktitut dans les médias pouvait constituer un moyen efficace d'improvisation créative, de préservation linguistique et culturelle et de transmission des savoirs traditionnels. Presque 20 ans plus tard, Internet représente l'un des principaux moyens de communication pour les jeunes Inuit du Nord canadien. Cependant, reste à savoir si la qualité des médias en inuktitut disponibles électroniquement peut se comparer à l'exemple de la préservation culturelle et linguistique instaurée par les visionnaires de l'IBC à ses débuts. Cet article prend le contrepied des approches théoriques voulant que les Inuit soient linguistiquement et culturellement vulnérables. Il considère les contenus en inuktitut des nouveaux médias comme une concrétisation du mot *airaq* ('racines comestibles') utilisé ici comme un modèle de la force, de la résilience et de l'adaptabilité. L'article conclut que la créativité et la prolificité des premières productions de l'IBC devraient constituer la norme de référence pour une nouvelle génération de créateurs de nouveaux médias en inuktitut.

**Abstract:** *Starting Fire with Gunpowder* revisited: Inuktitut New Media content creation in the Canadian Arctic

In 1991, the Canadian documentary *Starting Fire with Gunpowder* was produced, focusing in part on the history of early media productions by the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC). It examined how the creation of Inuktitut media content could be an effective means of creative improvisation, linguistic and cultural preservation, and transmission of traditional knowledge. Almost 20 years later, the Internet serves as one of the primary communicative methods for young Inuit in the Canadian Arctic. However, it remains to be seen whether the quality of Inuktitut media online can compare with the example of linguistic and cultural preservation set by the visionaries of the early IBC. This article challenges prevailing critical approaches to the Inuit as linguistically and culturally vulnerable. It views Inuktitut New Media content as an embodiment of the word *airaq* ('edible roots'), used here as a model of strength, resilience, and adaptability. It concludes that the creativity and prolificacy of the early IBC productions should set the standard for a new generation of Inuktitut content creators online.

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## Introduction

In 1991, filmmakers James Cullingham and Peter Raymont produced the five-part documentary series *As Long as the Rivers Flow* about Aboriginal self-determination in Canada.<sup>1</sup> The series was awarded over 20 international awards, among them the Producer's Award at the American Indian Film Festival in San Francisco. It was reviewed in glowing terms: "*As Long As the Rivers Flow*, spawned in the blood and intellect of native and non-native Canadians against absurd odds, is a benchmark in Canadian documentary filmmaking" (Quill 1991). The fourth volume of the series, the documentary *Starting Fire with Gunpowder*, was directed by David Poisey and William Hanson in 1991, as a project of the UNESCO World Decade for Cultural Development. In part, it focuses on the origins of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC). The introduction begins with First Nations narrator and internationally acclaimed actress Tantoo Cardinal:

When I was young, stories were the way of passing along information. Now that methods of communication have changed, we are taking those tools into our communities, and making them our own. Satellite dishes like this one (points) relay pictures from every part of the planet. Some of those pictures are now coming from the Canadian Arctic. The IBC (Inuit Broadcasting Corporation) is an inspiration to us all (in Poisey and Hansen 1991: 0:50)

The concept of creative technological appropriation or, as Cardinal expresses it, "making them our own," is the primary theme of this article. In other words, existing technologies can promote cultural empowerment and linguistic preservation, but without the proper theoretical underpinnings that same technology can also undermine such efforts.

If more Inuktitut content is to be created,<sup>2</sup> we must remember that the Internet, while theoretically a vitalising force, can also be detrimental to the maintenance of minority culture, linguistic integrity, and cultural diversity (Kampf 2004; Landzelius 2003; Pannekoek et al. 2003; Savard 1998). Language loss is becoming critical. Globalisation is replacing minority languages, and "English dominates the world of computing" (Norris 2001: 59). Many Aboriginal languages are now maintained solely by the eldest community members and will cease to be spoken once they pass away (Krauss 1992; Villa 2002). Statistics Canada (2001) estimates that "in general, many of the Aboriginal languages spoken by North American Indian and Métis in non-reserve areas are on unsteady ground." The Internet has increased this disparity. Even when minority language content is available, software and hardware interfaces written in nonlocalised<sup>3</sup> languages hinder the use and retention of mother tongues (Cunliffe 2005). Many minority language users feel that "[...] people have to use English too

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.nfb-onf.gc.ca/eng/collection/film/?id=29929>.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term Inuktitut to encompass all the Inuit dialects of the Arctic. Syllabics are used along with Roman orthography in Nunavut and Nunavik (Canada) but not in Greenland, Alaska, or Siberia.

<sup>3</sup> Localisation in this sense signifies the linguistic adaptation of software to a culture.

often on the Internet” (Wei 2005). The dangers of language and cultural loss seem to be real:

The scientific community has warned that [...] historical assimilation campaigns—combined with declining Indigenous populations, increased mobility, economic pressures, as well as exposure to television and other communications technologies—could lead to the loss of half of the world’s 6,000 to 7,000 languages by 2050. With such a decline will come the demise of local knowledge, creativity and heritage, as well as specialized information such as unique survival skills and traditional medicines (Fabbi 2008: 1).

Facing threats to language such as these, I propose revisiting *Starting Fire with Gunpowder* with an eye for the creative techniques that the earliest Inuit filmmaking group Nunatsiakmiut (‘People From the Beautiful Land’) used in the 1980s. I will argue that the energy and passion of Nunatsiakmiut, which inspired and eventually merged with the IBC, should catalyse Inuktitut content creation for websites and social networking in the North. The article is structured around the dialogue and flow of *Starting Fire with Gunpowder*, and incorporates data from fieldwork in Inukjuaq, Nunavik (Pasch 2008).

### ***Starting Fire with Gunpowder* visionaries**

One of the most compelling aspects about revisiting *Starting Fire with Gunpowder* almost 20 years after its production is that many of the featured young Inuit filmmakers, producers, and passionate media activists have gone on to become leaders in their communities, inspirational figures in the North, and role models for a new generation of Inuit and Qallunaat alike. For instance, Tantoo Cardinal was made a member of the Order of Canada in 2009. Josie Kusugak, as the president of the Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., has represented the Inuit in land claims negotiations. During Kusugak’s interview in the documentary, he offers significant and perceptive insights into the adaptable Inuit approach to technology:

I think Inuit are not shy of television or radio. The Inuit have always been a very communicating kind of people, but it has been very slow, because they would take messages from one community to another, from one region to another, only by dog-teams. And it was only through word of mouth that they were able to pass this on. And not having any written history, this form of communication, radio, and television was as old as it was new: an oral form of communication (in Poisey and Hansen 1991: 2:02).

Throughout the documentary, Ann Meekitjuk Hanson narrates and offers her commentary, guiding the viewer in properly understanding the film creations. She agrees with Kusugak that the Inuit are communicative and mentions additionally the importance of media production: “there are far more films and television shows in Inuktitut than there are books written in our language (*ibid.*: 1:42). Hanson is part of the young Inuktitut media-producing Inuit who have gone on to become cultural and political luminaries of the North. Commissioner of Nunavut since 2005, Hanson’s welcome message on her official website states that:

As the Government of Canada's senior representative in Nunavut, I am the link between the government and the people. In my role as Commissioner I am the keeper of our traditions and I will reflect the values and interests of Nunavummiut in all my activities. The strength, independence and creativity of our people made Nunavut a reality. Today, Nunavummiut are building their territory while preserving a unique culture, language and connections to the land. As I travel throughout Nunavut, across Canada and beyond, I look forward to supporting the betterment of Nunavummiut as they contribute to a prosperous and vibrant Canada (Hanson 2010).

As emphasised by Hanson, it is not only the strength and independence of the Inuit, but also the *creativity* that, in part, have made Nunavut (and Nunavik and Nunatsiavut) a reality. A significant example was the role that the early IBC played in demonstrating the power of media production to preserve Inuit language and culture (Alia 2000, 2010; Roth 2005; Roth and Valaskakis 1989; Valaskakis 1983, 1988, 1992).

One of Ann Meekitjuk Hanson's first comments in the documentary concerns her impressions of the importance of Greenland. After the creation of a local TV operation in Northern Quebec, the IBC opened in Iqaluit on September 29, 1980. Although Inuit television broadcasting and filmmaking was quite new, Inuktitut radio broadcasting had been around for some time. That said, many of the Inuktitut radio broadcasts heard in the Canadian Arctic came from an unexpected place, Greenland, as Hanson remembers:

When I was a little girl in Lake Harbor, my uncle used to listen to radio from Greenland, which was in Inuktitut, but it would fade away because it was in short-wave. And we couldn't get it. But he used to have to get up very early in the morning, just to hear it. This was the first experience I had with Inuktitut programming on the radio (in Poisey and Hansen 1991: 4:42).

The creative possibilities may be considerable for New Media collaboration between Canadian and Greenlandic Inuit. The estimated population of Inuktitut speakers in Greenland is approximately 55,000, and thus even exceeds Canada's Inuit population, estimated at 50,485 (Statistics Canada 2006). As Dorais (1995) writes, various aspects of education in Greenland, where Inuktitut is mainly used from kindergarten through high school, could benefit language preservation in the Canadian Arctic. As Allen (2007: 515) corroborates, "In most of Greenland [...] however, virtually all Inuit still learn an Eskimo-Aleut language from birth and continue to speak it throughout their life. [...] all Greenlanders grow up fluent in Greenlandic, [and] receive instruction in Greenlandic throughout their schooling (including some courses at the University of Greenland)."

To solidify identity in the Arctic, and to retain language and culture while still embracing technology, there should be development of relationships between Inuktitut-speaking communities. Freeman (1995) cites Dorais (1990) on the linguistic strength of Greenlandic Inuktitut:

Inuit have increasing contact with a circumpolar international linguistic community [...] Kalaallisut, the Greenlandic dialect of the Inuit language, is the national language with about 50,000 speakers and a 265-year history of indigenous language education. The Inuit teacher education college, Illiniarfissuaq, first graduated teachers in 1845. Among the institutions supporting Greenlandic are a university, national library, printing house, bookstore, national archives, and diverse media (Freeman 1995).

It is possible to enhance creative communication between the Inuit of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Siberia, thereby constructing culturally optimised online connections among Inuktitut-speaking peoples. Such connections could lead to collaborative wiki-based Inuktitut portals, serving simultaneously as repositories for Inuktitut web content and housing tools and techniques for empowering Inuktitut New Media creation.

One of the most positive aspects of *Starting Fire with Gunpowder*, is that its dialogue focuses on resistance to cultural dominance without relying on anger or fear. It states the facts, realises the dangers, and proposes creative solutions rather than falling back into a negative or vulnerable response to the dangers of external media influence. In the early 1980s, the IBC realised that creative content in Inuktitut, and the channelling of new, personal, and powerful Inuit voices using all of the technologies at their disposal, was potentially the most positive and constructive way to reach their cultural and linguistic goals. They used their energies creatively and consistently to disseminate Inuktitut-based content as their top priority. Despite the positivity and idealism of these goals, the IBC had no illusions about the danger of foreign-language media saturation in the North. Ann Meektjuk Hanson speaks of the seductive nature of the Qallunaat's television, and mentions the dangers of too much exposure to English: "White man's TV arrived suddenly in the Arctic. It was very seductive to many of us, but the exposure to that much English language could have wiped out our culture in a single generation. We had to find our own broadcasting voice" (in Poisey and Hansen 1991: 2:35).

### **Critical theories of the North: Dangerous waters**

Revisiting *Starting Fire with Gunpowder* requires a theoretical perspective that can guide our gaze back in time to recapture the early creative energies of Nunatsiakmiut and redirect them towards the revitalisation of Inuktitut content on the Web. When choosing the most appropriate theory for such an endeavour, we should remember that many conceptual frameworks applied to the North by non-Inuit researchers may inadvertently harm Inuit communities and should be carefully evaluated first.

In their guide for researchers, ITK and NRI (2006) outline some of the most important Inuit criticisms of the scientific methods of Qallunaat who come North to collect data. One is the danger of decontextualising local knowledge:

[...] generalization/decontextualization of local knowledge—local knowledge from different locations or groups are often inappropriately combined or generalized to present a generic picture of local Inuit knowledge which is, in fact, distinct or unique. In an attempt to make very complex knowledge understandable, local knowledge is often separated from the context in which it is situated (ITK and NRI 2006: 4).

Similarly, critical and cultural theories or conceptual frameworks can also be applied haphazardly to the North in general, and to the Inuit in particular, in order to “present a generic picture” of a situation that dramatically differs from the way that the communities perceive themselves. The danger here is in the nature of theory itself. As Tyson (2006: 3) explains: “each theory offers itself as the most (or the only) accurate means of understanding human experience [...] thus theories offer very different interpretations of history and current events, including interpretations of government policies.” Some conceptualisations of the North may, in fact, poorly apply to the Inuit.

One is that of an “Othered” region in the Saïdian sense. Orientalist discourse describes the Other as subaltern (Spivak 1988). Applied to the Inuit, Orientalist discourse may seem like an ideal fit (e.g., Fahrni and Rutherford 2008; Hoeveler and Cass 2006; Smith 2002). Certainly Denmark’s approach to Greenland has been equated to a post-colonial relationship (Bravo and Sorlin 2002). Using Orientalism as a starting point, it becomes possible to discern power asymmetry in the Western gaze on the Arctic. If researchers perceive the North and the Inuit as vulnerable, subaltern, or Other, they likely will focus on cultural dominance, i.e., post-structuralist discourses based on power, and post-colonial analyses of subjugation and repression. Indeed, the cultures and languages of the North can plausibly be considered fragile and vulnerable, as Ann Meektjuk Hanson did when describing her fear of language loss due to the scope of the first white programming available in the North.

Michel Foucault’s work on political and cultural power has also been used as a significant conceptual framework for looking at the North in general, and the Inuit in particular (e.g., Pearson 2010; Shadian 2010; Whitridge 2004). His work can additionally link post-colonial frameworks to examinations of race, including critical race theory (Hall et al., 1996; Omi and Winant 1994), linguistic hegemony (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991), and even issues of race applied to the Internet such as in cybertyping<sup>4</sup> (Nakamura 2002). It can thus be applied to the North to understand audiovisual electronic communication and content creation, especially in the areas of control and surveillance, and to trace and analyse power structures that exist in electronic form, as some work has done (Kaufert and O’Neil 1990; Savard 1998).

Are these theoretical approaches the best possible way to conceive of the Arctic, the position of the Inuit, and the particularities of the North? Does a post-structuralist worldview of the North as a discursively objectified signifier, or as an observed space

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<sup>4</sup> Cybertyping describes “the means by which users are able to express themselves online interact(ing) with [...] ideologies regarding race that they bring with them into cyberspace” (Nakamura 2002: 3).

in a Benthamic/Panoptic<sup>5</sup> (Foucault 1975) sense, most accurately encapsulate the cultural and linguistic situation of the Inuit? Perhaps even more importantly, does it help to further cultural and linguistic preservation in the North? Such a worldview suffers from several a priori assumptions, one being that the Inuit cannot help but be linguistically and culturally vulnerable.

Finally, there is another theoretical approach that may not necessarily apply to studies of the North and the Inuit in particular: Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony. This concept has in fact been applied to the Inuit (Joseph 2006; Meadows 1994). Gramsci's work may be considered well suited to understanding of linguistic hegemony because Gramsci was particularly interested, as was Bourdieu, in dominant groups and subordination through language. His work can also be used to describe sociolinguistic differences between high-prestige and lower-prestige speech communities (e.g., between English and French, as high-prestige, and Inuktitut as lower-prestige). It is reflected in research on language and symbolic power (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991) and also in concepts of language prestige (Gumperz and Hymes 1964). For Gramsci (1985: 165), however, linguistic relations are "representations and historical traces of past and present power relations [...] the network emanating from a homogenous cultural center." Although Gramscian theories, as well as Foucauldian and post-colonial ones, may be considered standard and accepted for studies of language and dominance, they may not be optimal approaches to the unique situation and perspective of the Inuit.

The above-mentioned theoretical approaches could be used to revisit Inuktitut creative capital in *Starting Fire with Gunpowder*. However, they are not the most appropriate ones for the particularly unique case of empowering Inuit voice through development of digital media.

### **The *airaq* as a conceptual framework**

I propose here a shift away from Orientalist, Foucauldian power-based, or Gramscian hegemonic discourses of the North to a distinctly Inuit model of resistance. This perspective is modelled after the approach of the IBC, but centred on the digital realm. It uses an Inuit word for the media network that links communities and serves to transmit and preserve language and traditional knowledge. The word is *airaq*<sup>6</sup> and means "a plant of which the Inuit eat the roots, and by extension, all edible roots" (Schneider 1985: 6). These roots transmit vital nutrients, whose consumption is invigorating, and health-giving. So too the creation of media content in Inuktitut may pave the way for the online preservation and expansion of Inuktitut knowledge for

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<sup>5</sup> In *Surveiller et Punir* (Foucault 1975), Bentham's 18th-century concept of the Panopticon is discussed in detail. The design of this prison structure allows guards to observe prisoners at will, without the imprisoned being able to determine if and when they are being watched.

<sup>6</sup> In the Siglitun dialect of the Canadian Western Arctic Inuvialuit, the term for *airaq* is *masu* (Lowe 2001: 64).

future generations. Such a new network, or *airaq*, will feed the culture, language, and identity of Inuit youth. Presently, little Inuktitut content is available on the Internet, especially educational and language tools for young people, and concerted efforts are necessary in order to create a distinctly Inuit repository.

### **Creative strategies of Nunatsiakmiut**

The IBC and the filmmaking group Nunatsiakmiut began with the introduction of the first video cameras to the Arctic. Similarly, the Internet itself only recently became available to the communities of Nunavik with the deployment of the Tamaani<sup>7</sup> wireless networks in 2004. The Internet attracts many young Inuit, just as Ann Meekitjuk Hanson felt attracted to the first video cameras.

We have always been fascinated with white man's technology. I remember the beginnings of filmmaking when I was a young girl. It started with people coming North to make films about us, either it was acting, or documentary. [...] "With Nunatsiakmiut, we made documentaries and educational films, and then the first Inuit drama, a soap opera. That first drama was called Lodi (in Poisey and Hansen 1991: 5:20, 6:10).

One of the first uses of video cameras in the North was to create an Inuktitut drama, *Lodi*. This soap opera addressed controversial subjects and faced troubling social issues. In the clip shown in *Starting Fire with Gunpowder*, Lodi is smoking a marijuana cigarette with his girlfriend, when his *anaanatsiaq* ('grandmother') enters the room. She demands to know what the smell is. Lodi claims that it is "just a cigarette" and that he cannot smell anything and sees fine. His grandmother, becoming more and more agitated, says that "Inuit don't have these smells" and threatens to go to the police. This type of content, focused on issues that matter to the Inuit, and spoken in Inuktitut, had real meaning for Inuit viewers. Not mincing her words, Ann Meekitjuk Hanson considers it to be an almost physical force pushing back the onslaught of foreign media:

The IBC at the time of the creation of Lodi was growing. When the two organisations merged (the IBC and Nunatsiakmiut), the combined production ability of the groups permitted 5 hours of Inuktitut programming each week. Everybody watched our shows. So the Inuit really pushed back the 1000 hours per week of alien and violent TV from the south (*ibid.* 8:20).

A telling moment in the documentary occurs when a young Inuit boy, about 6 or 7 years old, is asked: "Which stuff do you like best on TV"? His heartbreaking reply is "War. Armies" (8:50). There is also a candid interview with a family in their home: "I think it is healthy for them to learn about other cultures, about how other people live, but I would like to see more Inuit programming made by Inuit and for the Inuit, that would be really helpful" (*ibid.* 10:08).

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.tamaani.ca>



Figure 1. Inuktitut cover of bilingual (Inuktitut/English) comic book *Super Shamou* (2nd edition), created by Barney Pattunguyak and Peter Tapatai, written and drawn by Nick Burns, translated by Micah Lightstone, 1989, © Inuit Broadcasting Corporation.

## Super Shamou and Inuit role models online

The documentary also has an interview with Peter Tapatai, the secret identity and co-creator of the Inuit superhero Super Shamou. Broadcast in 1987, *Super Shamou* featured a hunter who was like other Inuit but had super hearing and was always on the alert for other Inuit in distress (Figure 1). On hearing a cry for help from some young Inuit trapped on the ice, he quickly left his tent, mentioning only that he was going out to find some caribou. He then shed his parka, revealing his red bodysuit and bright blue cape. He quickly leapt into the air and flew over the tundra, searching with his super-vision for the young Inuk in distress. Seeing the youth, Super Shamou descended rapidly, just in time to catch the boy and rescue him from the frigid waters of Hudson Bay. Warning the boy's two companions, who were apologetic and shaken, he advised them in Inuktitut that they must be careful, be available for each other, and thus always be friends. He then leapt off into the air to return to his surveillance of the Arctic.

Although *Super Shamou* may seem a juvenile broadcast to some, the importance of an Inuit superhero should be emphasised. As Peter Tapatai points out, superheroes are not a new concept for the Inuit, especially considering the tradition of shamans and spirits in the collective memory of the North, as exemplified in the film *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (Cohn et al. 2006). The documentary also stresses the importance of role models who look like young people and speak their language. The co-creator and original producer of *Super Shamou*, Barney Pattunguyak, adds that:

Our traditions are important to us: so is our future. It is really hard for most young Inuit to model themselves exclusively on the traditions of our ancestors. He (Super Shamou) speaks Inuktitut (16:03). As long as an Inuk is doing that, people can relate to it [...] it's their own superhero [...] it's something that the children can look up to. And when you speak Inuktitut and do some modern-day acting, that is a successful Inuk (in Poisey and Hansen 1991: 11:47).

Super Shamou is aimed at the teenagers, but everyone watches it! For the little children, the most popular show is *Takuginai*, the Sesame Street of the North, produced by both Blandina Makkik and Leetia Ineak (*ibid.* 16:30).

YouTube<sup>8</sup> offers the possibility of resurrecting past episodes of *Super Shamou*, *Takuginai*, and other IBC programming.<sup>9</sup> In this way, productions can be re-shown to an entirely new generation and viewed at will: a great advantage for Inuit parents who wish to expose their children to Inuktitut programming. As of this writing, it is tragic and symbolic that English voice-overs have replaced much of the original Inuktitut audio in some *Takuginai* episodes. If past episodes could be re-released as originally intended in Inuktitut, an appropriate broadcasting vehicle might consist of an IBC YouTube channel. It would not only contain *Super Shamou* and *Takuginai* episodes but also encompass the entire catalogue of vintage IBC content. If the material were

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com>.

<sup>9</sup> See: <http://www.youtube.com/user/takuginai>.

properly encoded, and easily found online, it could function as *airaq* for a new generation of Inuit. Barney Pattunguyak further points out:

[...] for Inuit to have been in contact with television for such a very short period of time, they have been able to convert this modern technology of television, they have been able to convert the thing that threatens a lot of other cultures. The Inuit have turned around and started recording television, the language, the culture, the hunting techniques, the different sewing techniques: things that would have been lost are being recorded (*ibid.* 10:32).

Television was a fantastic start. Now is the time to apply the same techniques to the Web. According to Blandina Makkik, one of the *Takuginai* producers:

When we started *Takuginai* it was to fulfil part of the mandate, which is if you are preserving a language and culture, it seemed pretty obvious that the people that were missing out are the children. There were some people worried about portraying animals in a cute way, considering we have to live off these animals, and we were asked by many people not to portray polar bears and other animals as cute and cuddly, because in our culture they are not cute and cuddly. So the non-people characters we created were the lemming and the seagull and the raven, which don't tend to offend (*ibid.* 17:41).

This example shows the danger to Inuit culture from outside programming. In the West, many children's cartoons portray animals as potential playmates. To apply this model to Inuit children could affect survival in a very direct way, as in a refusal to hunt or eat such animals. As comments Meekitjuk Hanson:

Most of IBC's work is about our culture—past and present. The Inuit world is very beautiful, but can be harsh, especially through the long night of winter. So our traditions reflect the tough realities of life in the arctic. I remember as a child many frightening legends about unpleasant things, scary things. But they are told so we learn to be careful—to watch out for danger (in Poisey and Hansen 1991: 19:03).

### **Further social issues addressed by the IBC**

The remaining minutes of the documentary address a variety of social ills facing the Inuit with sensitivity and candour. Paul Apak Angilirq, one of the actors in *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner* (Angilirq 2002), speaks of the legend of Asasa: “the legend teaches us that victims can fight back, and overcome their misfortune” (in Poisey and Hansen 1991: 25:24). Angilirq also mentions the significant ties between the Inuit from Greenland to Russia:

I heard there would be a project to build skin-covered boats among the Inuit of Canada, Russia, and Greenland, and to make the crossing from Russia to Alaska. We started our voyage from Russia [...] (where) they haven't lost the tradition; always they have used walrus umiaqs (boats). Even today. Inuit had to come from somewhere and [...] it is believed we came from Russia to Alaska, Canada, and Greenland, in that order. All these countries are the Inuit homeland. When I'm out there, I do a lot of thinking. I think a lot

about what they did and how they lived [...] our ancestors were brave and strong (in Poisey and Hansen 1991: 25:30).

The documentary concludes with thoughts on the importance of midwifery for Inuit, education on the dangers of contamination of fish, PCB contamination, solvent inhalation, spousal abuse, and other social ills. The variety of issues addressed in the documentary, and the focus on so many of them, demonstrates the breadth of impact that one production centre can have. The possibilities inherent in the Internet, with such a larger potential audience, and with the costs of distribution dramatically reduced, is inspirational only if immediate action is taken to create and distribute online Inuktitut content.

### **Growing a new generation of Inuktitut content online**

After watching *Starting Fire with Gunpowder* multiple times, the inspiration and optimism of the early IBC came through strongly. A sense of purpose in media creation emerged during the period chronicled in the documentary. That purpose, while still strong in media groups such as Isuma in Igloolik, is becoming diluted online by the lack of websites available in Inuktitut, and the lack of Inuktitut language learning and writing tools online. In Inukjuaq, I shared in the enthusiasm of the young people for the Internet, and saw the passion that so many have for social networking (especially on Bebo.com), but the vast majority of the social networking was entirely in English.

During the summer of 2007, I lived with an Inuit family in Inukjuaq and spoke with a variety of community members about language loss and the effects of the Internet on the younger generation.<sup>10</sup> All quotes were recorded and transcribed during the summer of 2007 in Inukjuaq, over a two-week period. All 31 participants were Inuit over 18 years old who lived in Inukjuaq and spoke Inuktitut fluently.

My 2-year-old is also learning English from TV and also her brother. Although I speak to them in Inuktitut they are still learning in English. The TV is stronger than us, also Internet when they get older (woman, age 27).

Some of my brother's Bebo friends refuse to speak Inuktitut. He is about 10. When they are around, his friends visit him and they are all speaking English. His friends say, "I don't understand Inuktitut, I don't know what to say."

Bebo is always in English; this has an effect for sure. For the real young kids, TV is a major factor, (and then) when they get a bit older, then into computers, and then they learn (even) more English. Treehouse Channel,<sup>11</sup> I feel bad. I speak to him in Inuktitut; he answers in English (woman, age 20).

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<sup>10</sup> Names were not recorded in order to protect privacy and comply with the University of Washington Institutional Review Board and Research Ethics Board requirements.

<sup>11</sup> The Treehouse Channel is a Canadian English-language programming television channel for preschool age children. See <http://treehousetv.com/>.

I am now more comfortable in English online than Inuktitut.

It has become difficult for me to type in syllabic. I would try an Inuktitut keyboard if they had one (man, age 21).

You don't have a choice when you go online; English is the only way I can use Bebo (man, age 19).

I tried Facebook, msn.ca, and Myspace, but they are boring. I like Bebo the most. (The structure is simple, one click. Most of my Inuit friends are on Bebo. (I use) qalujapaititik (Inuktitut in English letters). Its not the same (as syllabics). (English) coming from the outside world is far greater. (There are) more movies, music, (online) in English. My Inuktitut writing skill? I know how, but (I) don't use (Inuktitut) online, (I have) no chance (woman, age 22).

Even though we have downloaded the Inuit fonts, the kids don't use them; they are too hard to use, and not (available) on Bebo (woman, age 30)

More English everywhere everyday; things are mixing. We are in Ungava Bay, but if you go to Kuujuaq, you will notice, everyone is speaking English. It is coming to us from teachers, schools, TV, movies, radio, (and) the Internet (man, age 36).

So much going out at night, so much Internet, less hunting, less work. I am worried about my children, not enough Inuktitut teachers, not enough skills for the teachers, too much television, Internet, drugs, alcohol, pregnant early, suicide big problems for us

We don't know how to type in Inuktitut. We don't know how! We have never been taught how to use it on a computer, only KSB<sup>12</sup> knows but they never told us (woman, age 35).

When we use the Makivik website, they give us the choice to use whatever language we like, I like having the choice, to use my own language if I want. If I read in Inuktitut, it's better. I don't need a dictionary. I already understand everything. In English I need a dictionary (woman, age 26).

(I like the) pics, photos, new friends, music, Inuit friends, (but I) write in English; don't know why I don't write in Inuktitut

I heard complaints that it is not easy to use (Inuktitut online); it takes a long time to make Inuktitut signs on the computer. I never tried it, cuz (sic) Bebo is (in) English so I use English (man, age 19).

Many of these comments demonstrate a real desire to see and use more Inuktitut online in the North, especially while social networking on Bebo; however, current tools are insufficient for this task.

The remaining part of this section will look at two current examples that are working in the spirit of Nunatsiakmiut and merit further examination, in order to empower a new generation of Inuktitut content creators and learners online. One

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<sup>12</sup> Kativik School Board, see <http://www.kativik.qc.ca/>.

website, *Tusaalanga*, in particular is exciting in its implementation of Inuktitut.<sup>13</sup> This site has been partly created by Attavik,<sup>14</sup> a company supporting Inuktitut computing. It takes its name from *Inuktitut Qarasaujalirinirmut Attavik* ('setting a foundation for Inuktitut computing'). It uses exciting ways to build interest in Inuktitut, e.g., by streaming audio clips of Inuit communicating in Inuktitut. These online lessons can help non-Inuktitut speakers grasp many essential concepts while working with grammar, syllabics, and cultural content creation. The lessons can also be used as a refresher course for Inuktitut speakers who need to brush up or improve on finer points.

The site itself functions linguistically as both a learning centre and a digital compendium of songs, stories, and dialogues. Assignments are available, and all of the online services are free. The centre additionally offers courses that enable students to work with Inuktitut teachers who will speak monolingually for true language immersion. This site is unique for a variety of reasons. One is that many non-Inuit find it difficult to locate an Inuktitut instructor. The advanced digital resources at *Tusaalanga* can give a new learner a head start while preparing for the possibility of working with an Inuktitut speaker. Although *Tusaalanga* is an exceptional resource, it is potentially less useful for Inuit fluent in Inuktitut themselves, and perhaps more useful for non-Inuit speakers looking for initial training. Inuit especially need to be able to write online in Inuktitut reliably and consistently. This is especially so for users involved in Bebo and Facebook, the most popular social networking services currently used in the North.

A tool directly useful for native (and non-native) speakers of Inuktitut is Nunasoft,<sup>15</sup> which offers a series of technologies to adapt computers to cultures and languages. These technologies focus on preservation of First Nation and other minority languages. Nunasoft can particularly help the North with the extensive Inuktitut tools that are integrated into the website. These tools include *Nunatype*, *Nunaboard*, and virtual Inuktitboards, for typing and translating to and from Inuktitut. So many of the Inuit that I spoke with in Inukjuaq mentioned the same major problem: fonts, and resultant cryptic key-commands, when typing syllabics online. Nunasoft technologies assist by creating a virtual Inuktitut keyboard, from where syllabics can be easily and quickly added to other programs, including social networking, web design, and other content creation applications. It is this type of facilitating technology, empowering Inuktitut through digital tools, that most deeply evokes the spirit of the Inuit innovators in the early 1980s: "hacking" the Qallunaat's cameras for use in cultural preservation. Tools such as Nunasoft's can be used to harness the Web for increased Inuktitut communication in the North.

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<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.tusaalanga.ca>

<sup>14</sup> See <http://attavik.ca>.

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.nunasoft.ca>

## Conclusion

Ann Meekitjuk Hanson concludes her narration in *Starting Fire with Gunpowder* with an explanation of the title: “Ours is an oral tradition: we take to television so easily because television is an oral medium. If we are to be true to ourselves, we must preserve the traditions on which our culture is based: our most important task is to record the words of the elders while we can.” The documentary gives one example of how to preserve Inuit tradition through recording:

We took any cardboard and wet it and covered it with gunpowder. It was black all over with gunpowder. We rubbed the cardboard to soften it, soak it some more and dry it. Once it was dry, it was ready to start a fire. Before gunpowder, we used to use two pieces of stone. We gathered dry moss and other inflammable plants, good for fire. They held the flint stones above the dry moss and banged them together to make a spark. The sparks grew bigger and spread until it became a flame. They used gunpowder the same way (unidentified Inuk elder in Poisey and Hansen 1991: 57:01).

Gunpowder was invented to destroy things, to blow things up. But my people used it to start the fire, to light their seal-oil lamps. Of course today we use matches. Like gunpowder, TV can be a great destroyer, but we have turned it to our advantage. Inuktitut television is saving our language and preserving our culture. Our roots are grounded in their memories. In the future, their faces and their voices will be our only recorded history. It is by that recorded knowledge that we will judge ourselves in the future, and it is their recorded wisdom that will be the heritage of Nunavut (Ann Meekitjuk Hanson in Poisey and Hansen 1991: 57:22).

*Starting Fire with Gunpowder* can be a theoretical framework for understanding the importance of making more Inuktitut content available online, for free. If early Inuktitut content is made available on YouTube and Vimio, a new generation of Inuit and non-Inuit alike would be introduced to classic Inuktitut material, and Inuktitut speakers may be inspired to create content in Inuktitut. Since Inuktitut content was often extremely challenging to find for the purposes of the present article, I fear that many Inuit youth might not be able to access this material. Copyright laws should be examined with a view to releasing this vintage Inuktitut material.

Re-releasing this material online, while providing tools to make even more creation possible, would assist in growing the *airaq* of Inuktitut media on the Web. These portals should serve not only Inuit in the Canadian Arctic, but also the other Inuktitut-speaking peoples. By learning from the successful and vibrant example of Inuktitut in Greenland, and by integrating the tools and technologies mentioned above, it would be possible to build a stronger social networking community for all Inuit. Another idea: online correspondence between Greenlandic and Canadian Inuit, with the possibility of having a Greenlandic “pen pal” online, with all exchanges in Inuktitut (video, audio, and written) via a portal.

The Internet, like television, has the power of gunpowder and the qualities of a weapon as a great destroyer of language and culture. If however these tools can be

turned to the advantage of the Inuit and other minority cultures, as Nunatsiakmiut has shown so skilfully, the Web may rejuvenate and empower Inuktitut, on- and off-line.

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