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Nancy Wachowich et Willow Scobie

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Résumé de l'article

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Uploading selves: Inuit digital storytelling on YouTube

Nancy Wachowich* and Willow Scobie**

Résumé: La mise en ligne de soi: récits inuit numérisés sur YouTube

Cet article explore l'utilisation contemporaine par des jeunes et jeunes adultes inuit de sites internet de libre accès avec vidéos partagés. S'appuyant sur 12 mois de cyber-terrain spécifiquement sur YouTube, il explore comment les jeunes inuit de l'Arctique canadien utilisent l'espace virtuel pour partager de courts extraits de leur vie et interagir avec les autres. L'article situe ces autobiographies numérisées dans la récente trajectoire des pratiques de mise en récit inuit, montrant que la technologie Internet offre aux narrateurs individuels la liberté de contourner les règles sociales et les institutions de représentation culturelle établies. Les vidéos auto-produites affichées en ligne sont des expressions plus polyvalentes, dialogiques et provocatrices du soi inuit que les textes qui ont circulé dans le passé. Bien que l'Internet ait été célébré pour sa portée mondiale, la plupart des relations sociales et des dialogues apparemment favorisés par cette technologie sont intimes et localisés. Les jeunes et les jeunes adultes inuit utilisent la technologie vidéo comme médiateur créatif entre divers passés, présents et futurs possibles dans la création des nouveaux mondes sociaux.

Abstract: Uploading selves: Inuit digital storytelling on YouTube

This article explores the contemporary use of open-access video-sharing sites by Inuit youth and young adults. Based on 12 months of cyber-fieldwork and focused specifically on YouTube, it explores how Inuit young people across the Canadian Arctic are using online spaces to post short excerpts from their lives and connect with others. The paper situates these digital autobiographies in the recent trajectory of Inuit storytelling, showing that Internet technology allows individual narrators the freedom to bypass established rules and institutions of cultural representation. Self-produced videos posted online are more multivalent, dialogical, and provocative expressions of Inuit selfhood than those texts that may have circulated in the past. While the Internet has been celebrated for its global reach, many of the social relationships and dialogues seemingly fostered by this technology are intimate and localised. Inuit youth and young adults use video-sharing technology to creatively mediate pasts, presents, and futures in the creation of new social worlds.

* Department of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, Scotland, AB243QY, U.K. n.wachowich@abdn.ac.uk

** Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Ottawa, 55 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5, Canada. wscobie@uottawa.ca

Introduction

“Inukdan is here! INUK DAN!” shouts a Kuujjuak teenager, user-name *inukdan*¹, into his webcam (Figure 1). This declaration appears at the beginning of a 2:08-minute clip uploaded to YouTube on May 16, 2009. “Inukdan, random video 2” is one of 134 clips that he posted over a 14-month period². This young man, *inukdan*, is a prolific chronicler of his life; yet his fragmented digital autobiographical pieces are not unique or extraordinary. They exist alongside millions of others posted by Web users across the Arctic and around the world. There is, for instance, *JrAnnahatak* from Kangirsuk (a.k.a. “The Eskimo Guy”) who, in a 16-second video, spliced three clips of himself posing as different characters, all repeating that they would like some Doritos. There is *aliciesue*, a young woman who uploaded a 1:25-minute close-up of her baby, Inuktsiaq, learning to clap; there is *reomap*, who posted a 5:48-minute clip of a church band performing Christian music in the community hall in Mittimatalik; and there is *tikirarjuk*, who uploaded a 41-second clip of day two of a three-day blizzard, filmed from a window of a settlement house in Arviat.

What brings these young people to post these clips? Most seem to be spontaneously made, lacking obvious design or preconceived intention. Yet this act of connecting, expressing, creating, recording, and broadcasting oneself on video-sharing sites—what Wesch (2008) calls “YouTubing” oneself—has become increasingly common in Arctic communities. Since the 2005-2007 expansion of broadband Internet access via satellite into remote communities in the Canadian Arctic (Alexander et al. 2009; Hot 2010) and the more recent, transnational growth of social networking sites and video-sharing technology (Qualman 2009; Wesch 2008), the digitising and uploading of experience has become part of the “practice of everyday life” (de Certeau 1984) in the Canadian North. Geographically diffuse Inuit young people now create online spaces to post short excerpts from their lives and connect with others (Hot 2010)³. Online and offline phenomena are related and mutually constitutive (see Miller and Slater 2001: 4), as Internet channels develop into extensions of home spaces (Jones and Ortlieb 2008). These are sites where users share links to online material of special interest to them (such as music videos or television clips) and invite dialogue from around the world or from across the street.

¹ People who register on YouTube are asked to give themselves usernames. We refer to people in this paper by their usernames and we copy their format. Some users apply uppercase rules; others do not. We italicise usernames to distinguish them as names.

² All clips are accessible on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/>) by searching under title or username. However, channel owners may alter or delete material, making all content ephemeral.

³ This technology offers some freedom of expression, but it is still regulated by broadband capacity, household income necessary to purchase equipment, and, of course, restrictions that sites like YouTube place on the age of users and the form and content of submissions. Research on Web users in the Arctic shows few gender differences (Campbell and Henning 2010) and some limitations of access to home computers with high-speed connections (Looker 2010), but it is argued that this is quickly improving (Hot 2010).



Figure 1. “The Best of Inukdan part 1,” *inukdan*, 2009, on YouTube.

This paper reflects upon this discursive practice, as engaged in by a specific group of Web users: everyday Inuit youth and young adults such as *inukdan*, *JrAnnahatak*, *reomap*, and *tikirarjuk*. It begins with a description of our research and then situates digital autobiographies in a longer trajectory of Inuit storytelling. We suggest that this narrative movement acts as a novel form of historical consciousness in a digitally mediated age. We exemplify the range and scope of these autobiographical clips, highlight their fragmented and dialogical nature, and reflect upon the social networks and critical puzzles that these videos engender. We explore the ways in which computers, Internet broadband, webcams, and other recording technology inspire everyday Inuit youth and young adults—those so often left out of the picture—to tell their stories publicly. We suggest that, through the act of uploading clips and inviting

dialogue, Inuit assert their presence in the world and forge new online and offline (transnational and local) social networks. In this capacity, the Internet can be seen as inspiring a new and creative form of technological practice through which Inuit can mobilize themselves and engage different material and immaterial worlds.

Clicks away: The study

Our introduction to digital storytelling began with 12 months of cyber-fieldwork investigating information shared by Inuit youth and young adults through their Internet channels on video-sharing sites. Scholars who write about ethnographic research in a cyber-context describe how it distinguishes itself from offline forms in its primary reliance on textual, visual, and audio autobiographical material (Murthy 2008; Rybas and Gajjala 2007). Researching cyberspace involves the careful exploration, analysis, and documentation of online social processes (Ward 1999) but with the ever-changing nature of Internet content it also involves some good fortune. Working mostly from Canada and from Britain, our connections, communications, and collaborations for this cyber-ethnography have been primarily over the Internet. Yet our data is contextualised within the scope of longer-term face-to-face fieldwork on issues related to Inuit historiography (particularly for Wachowich) and the sociology of youth (particularly for Scobie). Embarking on cyber-fieldwork and navigating social networking sites is a challenging task. Each search term leads to new links and online material is constantly altered, edited, or deleted between visits⁴. Analytical claims regarding the vast and changing Web interfaces become elusive and largely exploratory, as every pattern the researcher discerns has exceptions (Burgess and Green 2009). Three students at the University of Ottawa were brought on board to help index Web material⁵. As our research progressed, our interests were drawn to the more *depictive* autobiographical practices: those that make up the majority of postings on global, open-access, social networking sites. We use the word *depictive* here to mean those “home movie” and vlog (video blog) style productions that present a version of life as it is happening, with no overt self-conscious sign of artistry, craftsmanship, or professional polish.

These brief, often fragmented, depictive clips exist in a variety of forms: from light-hearted skits, to vlogs, stunts, views filmed from a window, or excerpts from everyday life shot with inexpensive cameras or mobile phones. Some depictive clips exhibit technological savvy and are cleverly edited; others are sometimes blurry, off-centred, and perplexing. Yet, as researchers with interests in social and narrative movements, our undertaking was not to evaluate and establish aesthetic values but instead to explore how these user-generated, depictive autobiographical statements forge new social landscapes. Of particular interest were those depictive videos that bypass established rules of cultural representation and offer more multivalent, dialogical, perplexing, and provocative expressions of Inuit selfhood than those that

⁴ Such as IsumaTV, Facebook, Bebo, YouTube, and MySpace, among others.

⁵ One of these assistants also conducted several online interviews with vloggers and a face-to-face interview with a well-known Inuit video artist.

have been produced and circulated by more mainstream, dominant institutions in the past. We thus narrowed the scope of our analytical terrain to YouTube, the global, open-access, social networking site where many of these uploads are currently found.

Digital networking and social imaginations

Our contention is that these depictive YouTube clips exist as a contemporary and increasingly popular form of storytelling in Inuit communities. Scholars of Indigenous oral traditions have long described how storytelling provides frameworks for understanding, for imagining, and for inhabiting one's world (Basso 1996; Cruikshank 1998; Ridington 1990). But can the claims made for more traditional forms of storytelling be extended to new digital forms? To be sure, the Internet offers a means through which everyday young people can narrate their lives, demand a public voice, and inhabit their world in ways markedly distinctive from their elders. This endeavour, indeed this need, to make private stories public was best articulated by Arendt (1958 in Jackson 2006: 12-13) who reflected on how every person is "at once a 'who' and a 'what'—a subject who actively participates in the making or unmaking of his or her world, and a subject who suffers and is subjected to actions by others, as well as forces of circumstances that lie largely outside his or her control." Jackson (2006) suggests that the effect of being *acted upon*, of being the subject of forces of circumstances, can be reconciled through storytelling. The act of narrating our lives, he writes, brings our private experiences of the world into the public domain, where we objectify these experiences, manipulate them, give them meaning and, in this process, gain a sense of agency over our worlds.

Social networking sites such as YouTube provide everyday Inuit youth and young adults with a means through which to publicly "story" their lives through the creation of online profiles and the posting of autobiographical material. Because YouTube is a "bottom-up" platform for anyone with Internet access (Burgess and Green 2009), users can spontaneously bypass the more dominant Western historical consciousnesses and epistemologies that have traditionally governed media representations of Inuit social life. This contemporary uploading of depictive clips, we argue, is a "tactical" process engaged in by Inuit youth and young adults to claim their own narrative terrains in cyberspace and beyond. "Tactics" for de Certeau (1984: xv) are social forms of engagement in the world; they are diffuse, multiform, and fragmentary, not specifically or intentionally ideological, and often exhibit subtle subversive qualities concealed within modes of expression. Inuit use of open-access sites, such as YouTube, can be an unintentional form of representational political engagement that actively, if subtly, broadens the scope of understanding of Inuit young people's everyday lives.

YouTube offers Inuit the possibility of tactically engaging in the kind of personal and politicised meaning-making that Arendt (1958) and Jackson (2006) envisage, by providing a platform for spontaneous public expressions of everyday Inuit life. Of the uploads that we navigated upon and documented, many were purposefully intercultural in form and global in reach, attracting hundreds, thousands or, in some cases, tens of

thousands of registered viewers from around the world⁶. But far more often it seemed, we came across pieces that flagged issues, portrayed experiences, and raised discussions that are intensely intra-cultural, narrowly understood, and exclusive to Inuit, to the local community, or to just a small social circle of registered viewers self-identified as relatives, neighbours, and friends⁷. And some uploaded videos remained online despite having had no registered viewers listed at all.

While the ability of the Internet to provide a platform for political discourse and public transformation has been firmly established (Burgess and Green 2009; Chadwick and Howard 2009), many people make of the Internet what they will. They upload and post subjective interpretations of everyday experiences: ones that make little sense to the anonymous viewer, but instead speak to more intimate online and offline social worlds (Hine 2000; Jones 1998; Jones and Ortlieb 2008; Miller and Slater 2001; Slama 2010; Wilson and Peterson 2002). Scholars of Indigenous media writing about art (Myers 1994), photography (Pinney and Peterson 2003), film (Worth and Adair 1972), and video broadcasts (Deger 2006; Ginsburg 1994; 2002; Turner 2002) record the colourful ways in which Western modernist representational technology can be appropriated by Indigenous people and used to articulate local frames of reference, social relationships, and aesthetic categories. The degree of emancipatory value of new communications media and the extent to which Western technology limits or imposes a modernist frame on acts of self-representation have been focuses of longstanding attention (e.g., Ginsburg 1991; Leuthold 1998; Weiner 1997). Of issue in our study, however, is not the nature of Internet technology, nor its limitations with regards to access or forms of visual expression. Of greater interest are the opportunities it currently provides Inuit young people for creatively mediating social relationships and historical consciousness. Recent scholarship on Inuit use of cyberspace (Alexander et al. 2009; Christensen 2003; Hot 2010) calls attention to these opportunities and to the fluid connections forged online and offline. Indeed, in our examination of these video snippets of everyday life in the North, and of the dialogue posted in the comment section, we found that most of the input was from family or friends. In one of the YouTube messages Wachowich received during an exchange with *inukdan* from her office in Scotland, *inukdan* exclaimed, “scotland, i never thought people would watch my videos from there”⁸.

Much of the YouTube content that we examined suggests that young Inuit upload clips to social networking sites often on a whim, for fun, and for the entertainment of local audiences, drawing on local epistemologies, narrow discourses, and tacit

6 When accessing YouTube, viewers are asked to register and assume a username. Once registered, their visits to channels are calculated. Users can post commentary and invite dialogue. Most people, however, peruse YouTube as unregistered viewers. Consequently their viewings do not appear in the statistics.

7 These localised imaginings typify YouTube content more generally. Wesch (2008) notes that YouTube is not a form of mass media but a social networking site. Thus a large percentage of YouTube videos are meant for less than a hundred viewers.

8 Many Web users use non-standard “text messaging” punctuation in their online messages: using abbreviations, acronyms, and emoticons, disregarding standardised rules of English grammar.

understandings⁹. They send greetings, share news, comment on each other's videos, or gush over each other's babies. The material can be difficult to interpret by those not "in the know," as this content is often part of established relationships and ongoing conversations. By uploading these home movie video recordings, Inuit youth and young adults thus reinforce and strengthen connections by sharing accounts and stories about their everyday lives and adventures (Lange 2007, 2008).

Navigating new worlds: Changing Inuit storytelling in the past century

These Internet autobiographies described above are the latest genre of a long trajectory of storytelling among Inuit. In the past, oral traditions shaped social activity, enforced moral codes, and transmitted essential cultural knowledge and perspective in Inuit society. Stories covered a spectrum of topics and formed the very fabric of society. They taught people how to live together and experience the world. Words were powerful and could make things happen (Therrien 2008). Yet the form and practice of Inuit storytelling changed in the latter part of the 20th century with the move into settlements and the subsequent arrival of electronic communications media, schools, and government-sponsored arts and culture councils. The emergence of cultural consciousness movements in the 1970s saw a concerted effort on the part of a residential school generation to redress assimilation policies, preserve tradition, and depict the realities of settlement life (Graburn 1998, 2006; Wachowich 2006). Government-sponsored experiments with imported representational media, such as soapstone carving, printmaking, tapestry, print, and video broadcasting have since been variously successful in documenting elders' knowledge (deemed in danger of being lost) and rallying it in the service of "culture-making" (Myers 1994). Yet this cultural consciousness movement primarily involved a select group of Inuit culture brokers—artists, writers, videographers, and elder advisors—and relied on the mediation of research boards, government, Aboriginal and arts funding councils, and the buying/viewing public. These centralised institutions controlled, to a certain extent, via those able to act as spokespeople, what was said and how it was said. Modernist discourses of cultural authenticity, culture loss, and the existence of *Inumariit* (real Inuit), combined with a practical urgency at the local level to interview the last generation of elders to have lived a semi-nomadic hunting existence on the land, have consistently placed primary importance on narratives of "life as it once was lived" rather than on those of a more modern life as currently experienced and understood (Graburn 2006). Emblems of Inuit culture have gained high currency in this emergent cultural consciousness discourse (Briggs 1997).

Visiting university and government researchers, documentary filmmakers, curators, and teachers have reinforced this subtle privileging of voice, turning largely and habitually to elders as the keepers of Inuit culture. And in the process of collecting

⁹ Lange (2008) found that YouTube participants actively improve or diminish the chances of audiences finding their videos by setting broad or narrow tags associated with their videos. By setting the terms by which audiences can find them, participants manage their on-line networks.

and documenting what has come to be known as *Inuit qaujimaqatuqangit* (Inuit traditional knowledge), there has been omission of certain types of experiences and the perspectives of large segments of the population, those not deemed to be professional storytellers or artists (Stevenson 2006). While the value of retaining, promoting, and circulating knowledge of Inuit history, cultural traditions, language, and environment on the world stage cannot be under-estimated, the social realities of everyday Inuit, and primarily of youth and young adults, have predominantly been overlooked.

Within modern settlements and households, the limitations upon young people wishing to share their experiences are compounded by an entrenched generation gap that has become hard to bridge (Piercey 2008). Furthermore, the lingua franca of Inuit youth has become a hybrid one, born of schooling, television, and modern settlement life and thus different from the “old-fashioned Inuktitut” spoken by elders (Dorais 1993). In many households, the generations speak such different dialects and have such different values and interests that grandparents and grandchildren communicate only at the most basic level¹⁰. While, in the past, intergenerational storytelling formed the very fabric of society, and was essential to young people’s education and well-being, today few find the chance to regularly convene among their extended family and friends and share their experiences in public forums.

In an effort to offer a voice to Inuit young people, formal, organised institutions were established in the mid-1990s in the form of the Inuit Circumpolar Youth Council (ICYC) and the National Inuit Youth Council (NIYC). However, these organisations have limitations that stem from their structure: information flows largely within defined, politico-geographic networks and remains dependent on just a few designated representatives with mandates to define coherent issues of collective concern to Inuit youth as a politicised group (Neizen 2009)¹¹. Individual, subjective testimonies on what come to be identified as priority issues, such as language and cultural retention, suicide prevention, and education (www.niyc.ca), are collected by these delegates who travel between local, regional, national, and international offices and relay this information at meetings and summits. Subjective perceptions are condensed and constituted into formats that can be brought to the table as issues and voiced as recognised problems relevant to a pan-Arctic contingent of Inuit youth. At work in this centralised discursive model is the establishment of a collective, coherent category of subjects identifiable as *Inuit youth*. Thus, although these organisations give Inuit youth a *voice*, there is a difference between this engagement in formal political processes, on the one hand, and

¹⁰ Inuit youth, online and offline, repeatedly reference this generation gap between youth culture and the traditional culture of the elders and the subsequent feelings of being caught between two worlds: e.g., two 0:15- and 0:18-second skits by *JrAnnahatak* entitled “Eskimo Reply” and “Doritos.”

¹¹ The 14 youth delegates that comprise the NIYC are appointed according to regional and organisational representation and are given directives to collect and compile issues and concerns from their dispersed constituents. One member from each of the Regional Youth Councils (representatives of the four Inuit regions of Canada: Inuvialuit, Nunavik, Nunatsiavut, and Nunavut and the three regions within Nunavut, including Kivalliq, Kitikmeot, and Qikiqtaaluk) are appointed, plus six Regional Youth Coordinators employed by the respective land claim organisations. The fourteenth member is the Youth Intervener of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami.

the more tactical, non-focused, seemingly mundane practices of “storying” one’s life, on the other. The former can sometimes collapse into a narrow articulation of key issues, whereas the latter can burgeon into a broader, open-ended, collective, and dialogical articulation of private and public meaning. Recognising this distinction highlights the richness and breadth of possibilities embedded in the autobiographies of everyday Inuit youth.

You-tube autobiographical practice: Networked storytelling

Autobiographical accounts and tactical methods of storytelling online are different from the storytelling practised in igloos, sod houses, or tents in earlier times. They also differ from that conducted in town hall meetings and boardrooms, or that mediated through western art, print, audio recordings, or television programs. YouTube videos lack the authority, the narrative structure, and the professionalism of those narrative forms practised by elders, by emerging political leaders or by recognised artists with the financial assistance of art funding bodies.

In her research on the conditions of narrativity fostered by webcam technology, Ryan (2004) contrasts the narrative value of digital material with that of more conventional print narratives. Digital material generated from webcams, she writes, is not offered up for lengthy viewing but instead as series of “quick visits,” known in the field as “grabs” (*ibid.*: 353). Grabs have many of the same impacts on human cognition as postmodern texts. Ryan refers to them as “the visual equivalent of what Hayden White calls a chronicle: a chronological list of events that presents neither closure nor the causality nor the formal organization of a plot” (*ibid.*: 353). In this sense, posting webcam images can be considered a form of storytelling, yet one that does not strive for linearity or closure. Its fractured nature thus engages the viewers far more intensely in the discursive, collective, creation of an organic tale.

Meaning-making that occurs on these video-sharing sites is, for the most part, fractured, improvisational, and open-ended (Lange 2008). YouTube clips posted by Inuit youth and young adults may have a coherent narrative arc, or they may be as fragmented, incoherent, and thinly plotted as everyday life experiences can often be. Video-sharing technology allows anonymous viewers who come upon the sites either to click “pause” partly through the video (and then navigate away to other Web content) or to play and replay the video, upload their own related clips, and participate in a dialogue about its content with friends, family, and possibly strangers from far or near. Clips of everyday life have an uncertain tenure here. The practice of subscribing, commenting, and linking to each other allows anyone to add or disrupt an interpretation of the content, invite the audience away to their own videos, fill in, or highlight any gaps in the narrative (Lange 2008).

An evolving dialogical and unstructured self-narrative appears, connecting and weaving online “texts” (Carrington 2009) that can be continually edited, added to, or indeed removed from the Web entirely. The storytelling process becomes organic,

evolving, and sometimes fleeting. People's lives become linked together in seemingly dynamic, technologically mediated networks: multiple and overlapping, small or large, local or global in reach, varying in number, and uniform or diverse in background. The number of participants and the avenues of expression are seemingly endless, as networks intersect, and tales invite new tales. Members of the network share responsibility for the production of content on sites like YouTube; therefore all take part in shaping this unstable and dynamic landscape (Beer and Burrows 2007; Burgess and Green 2009). Those who post content are only partially responsible for the public construction of knowledge, as content is continually cast and re-cast in dialogue with the Web users who happen by.

Every viewer from within or outside the community is a potential storyteller, drawing his or her own subjective interpretation from the event on screen and then filling in the gaps privately or publicly. It is in this interplay that meaningful social worlds are created, be they enduring or more fleeting. People's lives are not experienced in isolation, but instead through open and continuous dialogue with others (Jackson 2006: 22). In this intensely social process of networked meaning-making, social interactions happen organically. The architecture of the Internet, with its web-like nodes (Castells 2000) and video-sharing sites (such as YouTube in particular), provide an open platform for personal expression: "Anyone with a webcam now has a stronger voice and a presence" (Wesch 2008). Participants, who record and upload videos, and who navigate and post on each other's websites, use social networking sites as a platform to engage in what Escobar (1994: 214) refers to as "techno-sociality." As more and more YouTube users are solicited to become a "Friend" or a "Subscriber" and to leave comments as they go, the participatory aspect of this cyber-culture is reinforced, transforming solitary individuals with computers into members of a connected community, one that enables its members to search, watch, listen, foster dialogue, and sometimes collaborate (Beer and Burrows 2007; Carrington 2009; Jenkins et al. 2006; Strangelove 2010). People share their private interests, their dreams, and their ambitions publicly and forge social networks with like-minded individuals within and outside their communities (Wesch 2008). And, in so doing, ordinary users, those not normally heard from in society, actively change what we can know and do know about them. In this process, they transform the social landscape into a constitutive space of their own making (de Certeau 1984).

Networks of trails

The techno-social YouTube landscape that we explored during our cyber-fieldwork was richly textured and highly differentiated. Our sample of video uploads was an opportunistic one, one that was constantly changing throughout our year of research and increasingly challenging to document. Periodic and repeated use of search terms such as "Inuit youth," "Inuk," or different Nunavut settlement names brought us to what seemed like an infinite number of links. Analytical potentials were everywhere. Our two criteria for inclusion were that the videos fall within our definition of "depictive" and (to the best of our knowledge) that they be material generated by an

Inuk¹². What follows here are just a few of the prominent digital storytelling patterns that we came upon in our research. The first three examples are of the production of knowledge and network-building within the circumpolar community and, by extension, transnationally. The final example is of network-building and storytelling offline and closer to home.

When one enters search terms such as “Inuit youth,” one accesses a wide range of online material aimed at promoting health, linking remote Arctic communities, preserving Inuit traditions, fostering cultural pride and inviting dialogue among young people across the circumpolar north. Some uploaded videos that speak to Inuit identity politics and are professionally produced, posted by emerging young artists, and funded by arts and government institutions. However, those of the more spontaneous and depictive genre, made by everyday teenagers and young adults, make up the majority. One such YouTube user, *nippikinitdrummers*, who uploaded four clips of traditional drumming and throat-singing, drew in responses from across the North such as *TulugakNochasak* who commented, “We all need to stick together ‘cause our Inuit culture has something true to share!!!” Likewise, one channel, made by *cybernorth2007*, has 50 clips of Inuit “cultural material.” He declares that his “Number One Fav” is a 4:09-minute video of renowned Inuit author and storyteller Michael Kusugak describing traditional laws. “Thank you so much! I am proud to be an Inuit!” *cybernorth2007* posts to Kusugak in the space below the video.

Such emblematic material, flagging identity discourses, also draws Web users from outside the North into dialogue. Responding to the *nippikinitdrummers* clips, *homousios* wrote on his channel: “You have some great videos about Inuit culture. I want to learn more and so I am subscribing.” When Iqalungmiut *qalasiq* uploaded a clip of two young women throat-singing in what appears to be an office, 29,500 registered viewers accessed the site and posted enthusiastic commentary, links to other “traditional practices” from across the Arctic, and links to other Inuit throat-singing clips. Below is a screen grab of two young girls throat-singing from *jenniferiguptak*’s channel (Figure 2). This blurry, low-resolution clip had 6,078 registered viewers by the time we submitted this paper and had drawn in enthusiastic comments such as from *CanadianMind*, “All I can say is WOW ☺,” from *pamlae*, “excellent work” and from *recurvebows*, “omg. great job. totally kickass.” For those sponsors, upholders, and fans of Inuit cultural traditions as they have classically been defined, YouTube has been a useful and effective communicative medium and a platform for artistic exchange and development.

¹² This was, of course, a loose classification based on variables such as when someone tagged their home community, gave themselves an Inuktitut username, or declared themselves as Inuit in their postings.



Figure 2. “throat singers Sharon & Jenna-Lee,” *jenniferiguptak*, 2008, on YouTube.

Yet cyberspace also provides freedom of expression to post un-vetted, provocative material that questions or more openly challenges dominant discourses of cultural authenticity. JrAnnahatak, for instance, uploads videos to YouTube from his dormitory room in Montreal. In some he vlogs, and in others impersonates different characters: a hip-hop fan, a biker, or a “traditional” Inuk. He dresses this latter character in traditional Inuit regalia and often performs the role acting as a simpleton, or a hostile, grumpy old man. The intergenerational strife he expresses through his online storytelling likely would not have had a forum in the past, or it may have been confined to private discussions, quiet asides, or meaningful glances made between close friends.

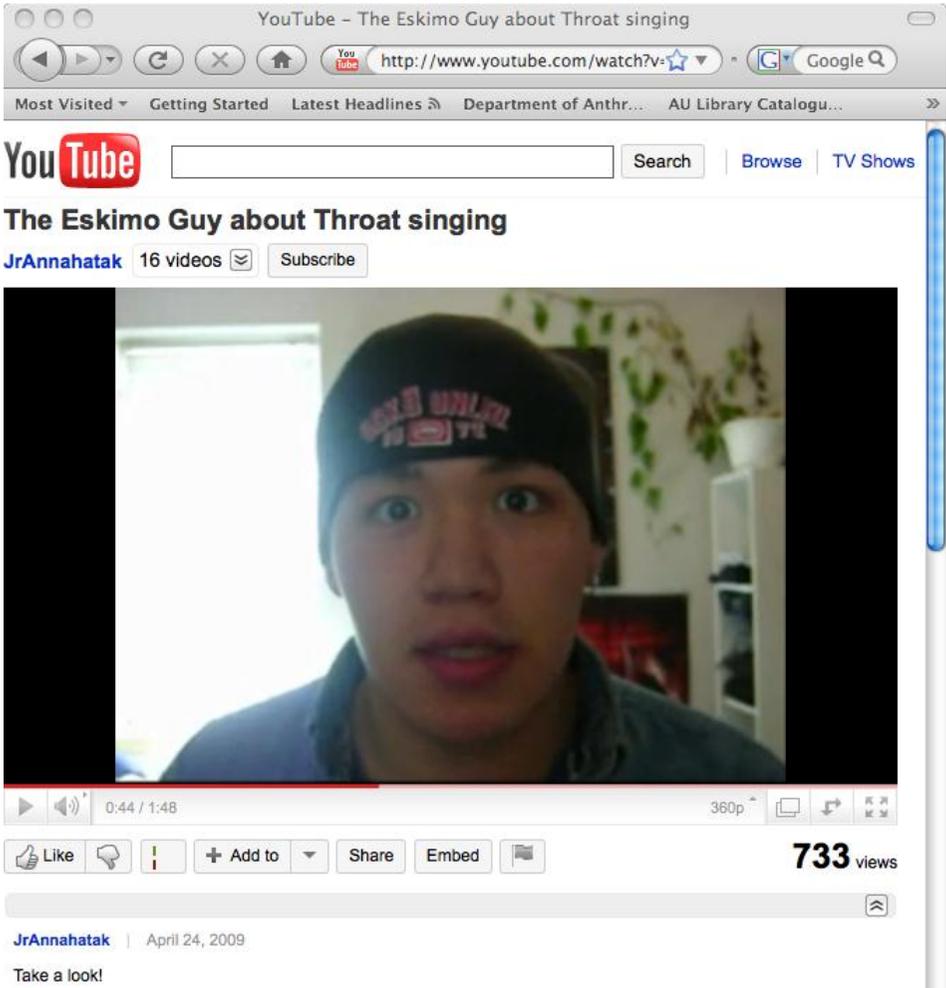


Figure 3. "The Eskimo guy about Throat singing," *JrAnnahatak*, 2009, on YouTube.

Another theme often emerges in *JrAnnahatak's* and other young peoples' more critical YouTube clips is the alleged ineffectiveness of contemporary cultural consciousness movements to address the social realities of Inuit youth, especially those living in urban settings. One of *JrAnnahatak's* fourteen uploaded videos is a 1:48-minute clip where he rails against the endorsement of Inuit throat singers at the expense of more modern Inuktitut artistic forms (like rock bands). The image below (Figure 3), taken from his vlog "The Eskimo Guy about Throat singing," shows him declaring, "I'm going to talk about throat singing and why everybody likes it. I mean, come on! [...] Just think, you're listening to some rap music or some rock 'n' roll and all of a sudden there's a disturbance of throat singers. Yeah, it does sound like a car wreck." *JrAnnahatak* uses YouTube as a platform to express a kind of disdain for that which is

generally considered to be a treasured heritage. His iconoclasm has an ironic twist as it plays with cultural stereotypes: “I kind of miss the North pretty badly,” he says to the camera, “I had to hang out in the fridge for a while.”

While online tactics employed by either promoters of Inuit traditions, or by iconoclast like *JrAnnakhatak* creatively articulate, challenge or subvert discourses of “Inuitness,” there is a second category of YouTube users who bypass identity politics altogether and cultivate networks relating to their own personal interests and hobbies. These interests might not be unique to the North. Identifying one’s music tastes on YouTube—by uploading links to popular music videos or uploading recordings of oneself playing music—is a common way for young people to reach out to other music-lovers, and Web users in the Arctic are no exception. These YouTube channels with links or with clips of young men, be they Inuit or non-Inuit, playing guitar or “air guitar” in their bedrooms are ubiquitous. Some try to distinguish their videos and attract viewers and dialogue through various ploys. In one of username *inukdan*’s 134 uploads, for instance, he plays riffs from three songs on a small pink guitar and then solicits feedback: “#1 #2 or #3 please comment under my video or comment on my channel most vote’s will be my new theme song.” Similarly, witness a public conversation between *JrAnnahatak* and *qjnumber35*, a young heavy metal musician from Kangirsujuaq, that took place in the autumn of 2009: “Hey joe whats up man, watch my vid adam playing drums naked and tell me what u think... dont focus on the title man, its nothing but to intrest people on da vid haha, listen to the music n tell me what u think... dats what we created 2 weeks ago... well later dude”¹³.

This young man, *qjnumber35*, beckons people from outside Kangirsujuaq to his online space by engaging in a common YouTube practice of provocatively labelling videos in order to increase the number of views¹⁴. His disclaimer to *JrAnnahatak* regarding his clip “adam playing drums naked!!” states that it is a publicity stunt intended to help circulate his music. In June 2009 this upload and its sequel: “Adams playing drums naked...Not... part 2” had drawn in over 800 registered viewers.

Research on Internet use points to the significance of social networking sites as a means to build affinity networks (*cf.* Lange 2008, Wesch 2008). Some YouTube users chose not to upload any material. Users, such as *sivuarapik99daisy*, who posted 120 links to music videos, and *JustAFront*, who posted 50, seem more interested in using YouTube to express their musical tastes (hip hop and death metal respectively) online and to dialogue with other fans, rather than as a means to promote themselves as musicians in their own right.

Creating online channels to share music also allows for a form of religious networking that is both local and transnational. Clips of Christian religious music performances, for instance, played by either a musician or a band on stage, as in

¹³ This text was taken verbatim from *JrAnnahatak*’s YouTube channel comment section.

¹⁴ Some people are inspired by videos they find on YouTube and replicate the style, content, or theme (Wesch 2008).

Reomap's "Bible Conference Pond Inlet," or self-filmed, as in *ronnieqiyuapik*'s clips of himself playing guitar and singing in his bedroom, can generate hundreds and even thousands of uploads and comments from like-minded Christians around the world praising the music and praising God online. People repeatedly accessing these clips establish themselves as interested in a larger, transnational Christian community that employs YouTube as an effective proselytising and community-building tool. The effectiveness of this networking medium is demonstrated in the clip of Christian singer Caroline Angalik singing *Pisukpunga* at a public event, posted by *michaelangalik*. It received 55,000 registered views.

Stunts and antics is our third category of depictive clips that work to facilitate broad-based social networking in the Arctic and beyond. Images of people playing with fire appear regularly in this category with over 2,850 videos flagged under the general search term "guys playing with fire." The aforementioned Inuit Web user *qjnumber35* is enthusiastic in sharing his fire antics online. One 2:35-minute clip that he uploaded, entitled "guys playing with fire, suite-pee system of a down,"¹⁵ showed a nighttime outdoor scene of a group of young men pouring cans of camp fuel on the ground, lighting the trails of fuel, and running through the fire. Below it *qjnumber35* adds his own comment: "... this is like 2-4 years ago man it old, it was fun... yeah hah." He followed up this video with a more intimate triad of clips, each less than 0:30 seconds long. Here we see a young man (perhaps *qjnumber35*—the frame shows just the hand) in a bedroom experimenting with igniting a bullet. Viewers see a bullet being placed on a table and then lit, in the first clip with a match and then with a makeshift fuse. All three clips conclude with the ignited bullet firing across the darkened bedroom and the cameraman clumsily putting the camera down, presumably to retrieve the flaming bullet. These stories are three of the 71 videos currently appearing on YouTube under the search term "firecracker bullet." They attracted over 2,000 registered viewers, some of whom posted links to other pyrotechnics in cyberspace.

Other stunts that figure largely in Inuit youth and young adults' depictive storytelling online are snowmobile tricks and parkour in and around the settlements. Twenty-year-old *jamieseeteenak*, for instance, purposefully or inadvertently drew the attention of over 18,000 registered viewers with his 25-second piece "arctic cat walk." This blurry clip shows a snowmobile doing a wheelie at the start of a snowmobile race in Baker Lake. Below is a screen grab from 20 year-old Web user *Nash1922*'s video called "Jumped" (Figure 4). Set to a soundtrack of hip hop music, the 2:17-minute clip portrays three teenage boys taking turns jumping off the roof of a house in Mittimatalik and then beckoning to the camera. At the time of our research, this channel had received over 5,000 views.

By scanning YouTube sites and tracking the circulation of the videos, we found we could roughly map the movement of our subjects through various social networks. Yet motivations and creative tactics are more difficult to discern. At whom, for instance, are the parkour videos directed? Is the bravado intended for a global audience, for

¹⁵ *Suite-pee* is the title of the song playing over this video, performed by the band System of a Down.

young men who practice parkour and free running in more metropolitan centres, or is it meant for schoolmates, workmates, neighbours, and friends? What about the music performances and uploads? This next section argues that often it is the more local values, sensibilities, aesthetics, and relationships that inspire this creative autobiographical practice online.



Figure 4. “Jumped,” *Nash1922*, 2007, on YouTube.

Local networks, local sensibilities

While some YouTube uploads, such as those described above, traverse cultural boundaries and connect with interest groups spanning the globe (be they fans of Inuit cultural traditions, particular musical genres, religious worshippers, people who like pyrotechnics, snowmobile stunts, or parkour), most of the YouTube material that we accessed evades easy classification and analysis. What appears most on YouTube are fragmented clips recorded by webcams, smart phones, and video cameras.

The inferences one can draw from *vilisiee*'s 0:16 video of two men pulling Arctic char through a hole in the ice near Salluit, or *MasiuVader*'s 0:54 clip of a young teenager dancing in a community hall in Kuujjuaraapik are infinite. This latter clip, titled "Minnie" is one of 36 videos *Masiu Vader* posted, which include: "Canoeing with a cousin," "Playing Volleyball," "Driving 24 ton dump truck," one of several of mining and roadwork taking place near his or her settlement, and, the most surreal piece titled "Puss in boots doll" in which a ventriloquised Puss in Boots puppet is made to talk like a space explorer. While watching these depictive videos again and again viewers are inevitably left to wonder about the larger story. Why, for instance, would *inukdan* choose to post "Inukdan truck stuck," his 0:25-second video of the thwarted efforts of his neighbours to haul a truck out of a snowbank, and then post a 16-second sequel, "Inukdan Another truck stuck"? How was username *Jeskimofo*'s 1:02-minute upload of Igloolik elders in a bubble-gum blowing contest received (see the probable winner in Figure 5)? Who were its intended audiences and what tacit systems of understanding were at work?

Much of the storytelling inspired by these clips takes place, we argue, in local, offline dialogues. Cyberspace explorers from around the world often have no obvious way of unpacking or making sense of scenes such as the bubble-gum blowing contest or the talking Puss in Boots puppet. We are given no road map. Some autobiographical online stories are political. Some are more intimate, some playful, and some just banal. Yet through them we meet Web users' family or friends; we witness over time that they have had their hair cut or their braces removed; we ascertain what they find funny, annoying, exciting, and troublesome. We listen to their favourite music and accompany them to community events and on tours of their schools or settlements. We watch their children grow. The type and scale of personal revelations, the degree of intimacy invited, and the perceived aesthetic or filmic quality of the pieces may vary. Many lack a clear, narrative arc, yet they provide bits of experience to be "storied" by both the channel owner and the viewers.



Figure 5. "igloolik 2 219.AVI," *Jeskimofa*, 2008, on YouTube.

Conclusion

Internet technology must be seen within a long history of the technologies used by Inuit to bring their world into being. In a world where centralised government control of political and media institutions invite certain cultural representations to take precedence, video-sharing sites offer an important, more "everyday," avenue for Inuit youth to claim a voice

In the move from hunting to wage labour subsistence, younger generations of Inuit have been faced with increasing levels of social crises and anomie. Jackson (2006: 34) reflects on “broken journeys” and the struggles people face when “natural disasters and social upheavals destroy the balance of power between a person’s immediate lifeworld and the wider world.” Under these circumstances, he argues, storytelling becomes ever the more important, for it offers up ways in which people can create, share, and reconfigure experiences. Storytelling is crucial to processes of re-empowerment, for in the act of telling a story we bring experience out of the private consciousness and into the public realm. And by doing this, we bring these experiences under our control. By telling stories, we create the world around us and become social beings. As Arendt (1958: 176 in Jackson 2006: 39) wrote, a “life without speech and without action [...] is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.” We have a need to tell stories and to spur dialogue, especially in instances where state, institutional, or societal recognition is withheld, for it enables a form of alliance. When stories are “salted away in subjectivity and silence,” writes Jackson (2006: 40), they become “marks of insignificance and of shame”; they become pathological. In the Inuit case, can emergent digital autobiographies lead to new alliances and representational authority among Inuit youth and young adults? Will the use of digital video-sharing sites like YouTube strengthen social relations that can improve social conditions in the physical world of the settlements?

Our argument has been that the Internet has become one of the tools that will ensure the survival of Inuit young people in the 21st century. As social scientists, we become part of this storytelling process, taking up our traditional place as listeners of stories and recorders of cultural processes. Yet our role is made different in these virtual spaces, for we engage in these digital social networks often anonymously (and voyeuristically) and from the comfort of our living rooms and offices (Murthy 2008). Moving beyond the Arctic field site as a geographically defined locality and navigating instead these new digital landscapes relieves us of the face-to-face awkwardness of some ethnographic encounters. In cyberspace, the politicised identities of “researcher” or “Inuit informant” are mixed with multiple other online identities. And none are for certain. Access to cyberspace shifts traditional research power relationships and challenges the relevance of research licensing bureaus in regulating access and activities. Yet, by focussing our attention on Inuit online autobiographies, our aim is not to disregard the value and necessity of traditional, long-term, face-to-face ethnographic fieldwork in one locale. In cyberspace, online material is limited: the frame of the screen limits our contextual observations (Wittel 2000). And Internet ethnographers can never be certain whether the data are valid, or even whether the people one is meeting online are real (Wesch 2008).

By uploading their digital autobiographies, young Inuit such as *inukdan*, *JrAnnahatak*, *aliciesue*, and *sallyatagootak* mediate aspects of their everyday realities for public viewing and root themselves simultaneously in global Internet and Arctic spaces. At first glance, their depictive work may seem incoherent and self-indulgent, but this is only when we interpret them in isolation from the web of social relationships in which they exist. These shifting social networks can be large or small, digital or

face-to-face, located around the world or across the settlement road. The message can be elegantly and professionally produced or it can be a quick upload from a smartphone. It is not the form that matters, but the act itself of uploading. A better understanding of the everyday institutional barriers and representational paradigms Inuit must negotiate, be they in their home communities or in urban centres, offers up a deeper reading of Internet storytelling and the precise way people locate themselves in the context of these cyber- and real-worlds. Our argument is that a young teenager's proclamation "Inukdan is here! INUK DAN!" embodies an important historiographical movement in the Canadian North. Outside representational politics and youth summits, and in parallel to professionally produced documentaries by and about Inuit youth¹⁶, the young people of the Arctic move between English and Inuktitut (both appear in the text on their YouTube channels), traditional and contemporary forms of expression, and share the everyday moments and events they recorded for reasons that are entirely their own. Their stories need not make sense to outsiders. Their "tactics"—their videos of their everyday lives—are evocative pieces of bigger stories that make sense in the greater social context. They address individual and collective pasts, presents, and futures. Storytellers might be by themselves in front of their cameras in their bedrooms at home, but on YouTube they are not alone.

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¹⁶ E.g., *Staking the Claim: Dreams, Democracy and Canadian Inuit* made by Entheos Film or *Ullumi* uploaded on IsumaTV.

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