

## **Arctic Learning on Corporate Social Media: Why We Need Non-Profit Social Platforms**

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### **Introduction**

In today's digital era, accessing information to understand places unfamiliar to oneself presents unique challenges. For those living in North America, introductions to unfamiliar places often happen on social media platforms—the technological infrastructure that enable online forums for communication (Fuchs 313). Unlike previous generations, ours has access to vibrant, real-time, and instantaneous depictions of places abroad. Thus, social media have the capacity to shape how we think about places around the world and the vibrant communities that inhabit them, signaling the importance of evaluating these platforms. As communications scholar Christian Fuchs has pointed out, social media are not neutral couriers of information, but are shaped by the socio-political and economic contexts in which they are developed, contexts that cannot be overlooked (367). Thinking about social media's development under the pressures of neoliberal capitalism, one can better consider how these platforms, by design, privilege specific communication types and information, while underrepresenting others.

A place to which few southerners in North America will travel, largely due to economic barriers and geographic remoteness, is the Canadian Arctic—the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Yukon, and

northern parts of numerous provinces. Yet, it is important the Canadian Arctic is represented to and understood by southerners. This urgency arises from the ongoing climate crises, demanding collaboration and strategies informed by the experiences of those living in the north. Brennan Vogel and Ryan Bullock illustrate this necessity, highlighting that in northern Canada, “changing species migration patterns and unpredictable weather conditions significantly disrupt resource dependent economies and the food security of Indigenous communities practicing traditional livelihoods and harvesting activities” (2559). Nobel Peace Prize winner and climate activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier captures this interconnected reality and need for building collaborative solutions in her book, *The Right To Be Cold*, stating that “the Inuk hunter falling through the melting ice in the Arctic is connected to actions in the South, to the cars we drive, the policies we create” (305). While social media are important tools for southerners’ learning and fostering collective action, leveraging it faces two key obstacles. The first stems from the disparities northern communities face in accessing social media—a circumstance Andreas Kuersten calls the Arctic Digital Divide (93). Kuersten stresses the inequity when it comes to “quality and price of telecommunications services” wherein Arctic communities find themselves “paying more for slower and less reliable connectivity” (93). Illustrating this issue is Nunavut’s dependence on satellites for communications services, as opposed to fiber optic cables, which Célestine Rabouam argues, “significantly reinforces the digital inequalities” (2). There is no question that the conditions for social media content creation and consumption differ between users in the north and south, and that removing existing inequities, such as cost and reliability, could improve the circulation of knowledge between those living in the north and south (Rabouam 4). While the continued development of infrastructure involving northern communities is needed to address this parity, the second issue, falling more into the domain of public opinion and political practices, is the one I am interested in taking up: how the economic and political forces of neoliberal capitalism undermine the social

aspect of social media platforms, restricting creative deliberation and exchanges of knowledge. While social media facilitated my learning about the Canadian Arctic and the climate crisis burdening its communities, I observed the limitations of profit-oriented platforms and, alternately, the importance of non-profit social platforms for enabling democratic and vibrant forms of knowledge exchange. The need for more expansive social platforms is emphasized in addressing the climate change impacts in the Arctic, where bridging north/south knowledge and facilitating learning are essential.

### **The Unfamiliar: Situating Myself in Relation to The Canadian Arctic**

Growing up as a settler in southern Manitoba, my knowledge of the Canadian Arctic was limited to areas on a map. I remember choosing three different colours to shade them in on my map of Canada in high school social studies class. I learned to think about this area according to the traditions of colonial naming and measurement, seeing their place in relation to the nation of Canada. And as instructed, I saw them as vast uninhabited lands. Fast forward six years and my studies in communications led me to an internship with the Arctic Research Foundation to peruse research on Arctic science communication. Immediately, this region unknown to me became populated with place names and images of vibrant culture.

My task with the Arctic Research Foundation (ARF) focused on using social media to sustain a well-established northern audience, while expanding the southern audience of Arctic Focus, their online platform where Arctic researchers and communities join to share stories of the Arctic. For the research aspect of my internship, I initially sought a better understanding of the composition and circulation of Arctic science stories online. As I entered various social media platforms via the Arctic Focus accounts, I quickly

learned my research would not be separate from my work with ARF, but was embedded into my task of maintaining and expanding their digital audiences. This process provided an opportunity to learn about the Canadian Arctic and think critically about sharing science stories and information about the climate crises using social media.

### **Twitter: #Sealce and Arctic Academics**

Twitter is one of the key platforms used by Arctic Focus to circulate stories of science, culture, conservation, and other information related to the Canadian Arctic.<sup>1</sup> Sharing content on Twitter to well over four thousand users, as well as consuming content from over six hundred users, played a significant role in my learning as a southern social media user over the past ten months. Knowing very little about the Canadian Arctic, I approached the task of growing the Arctic Focus Twitter audience from an understanding of the platform's networking features, one of which is a recommendation system. The function of this system is to personalize Twitter feeds by using "historical user data to predict what content or information the user would like to be exposed to in the future" (Smith et al. 592). Identifying and engaging with as many key actors in the field of Arctic science journalism was step one. I did this by following users who had written for or collaborated with Arctic Focus, including southern Canadians researching Arctic science and northern researchers. From there, in addition to the Arctic science researchers already followed by the account, Twitter's recommendation system pointed me to other accounts, as Twitter would say, *I may like*.

I quickly learned that this feature facilitates a kind of gathering, where hashtags and accounts like #Sealce and @Oceans\_North function as meeting spaces. As I scrolled through the profiles of Arctic science researchers, I noticed key hashtags like #Sealce,

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Twitter' in this text refers to the social media platform now known as 'X,' following its acquisition by Elon Musk and subsequent renaming.

and, from the Tweets attached, learned the importance of sea ice as an indicator of climate health, stability, and ecosystems. I learned about the efforts of Oceans North, a group supporting marine conservation in partnership with Indigenous and coastal communities. The science stories and knowledge shared between researchers and users under #Sealce would have remained unknown to me had I not entered Twitter through the eyes of Arctic Focus. Even from the perspective of Arctic Focus, the limitations of the recommendation feature are evident in that it did not suggest significant amounts of content produced by Inuit social media creators discussing climate change.

Consider Inuit climate activist and President of Canada's National Inuit Youth Council, Maatalii Okalik, who contributes significantly to climate change discourse under the username @Maatalii, sharing invaluable insights with her 2,895 followers. I had not heard about her until after my time on the Arctic Focus Twitter account. Likewise, I was not recommended Ossie Michelin, also known as @Osmich on Twitter, an Inuk award-winning journalist who has spent a significant amount of time sharing information about the Arctic, including stories about science and culture. As an example of Michelin's contributions to the circulation of Arctic science stories, consider his article on "Inuit-led marine conservation" in Nunatsiavut (Michelin para 12). It is worth noting that numerous examples illustrating the lack of recommendation for Inuit social media content creators on Twitter could be provided.

Douglas Rushkoff anticipates and critiques this reductive outcome of algorithmically personalized feeds, arguing social media feeds are designed this way to serve the interests of advertisers rather than encourage diverse community and the nuanced communication that arises from it (32). Social media are "no longer in the business of delivering people to one another; [they are] in the business of delivering people to marketers" (Rushkoff 32). While I was able to use the recommendation algorithm and personalized feed as a tool

to connect me to key figures in the Arctic science community, it is undeniable that these platforms and their features have limitations, ultimately serving the interests of owners, especially through the commodification of user data (Rushkoff 32). I am still left knowing there are northern voices on social media speaking about climate change that remain hidden from me, as I am delivered to those primarily southern Canadian Arctic researchers who are deemed most popular.

As an example of how Twitter can provide helpful connections, but also dead ends, I might cite the connection I made with Arctic freshwater ecologist and PhD student Danielle Nowosad. Twitter recommended Dani's profile to me after I had followed other Arctic science photographers. However, it was not from Twitter, but only through conversation with Dani—an arranged question and answer interview about her work using DNA barcoding in Nunavut—that I learned about the Indigenous Knowledge Social Network and platform, SIKU. Dani was hopeful that eventually SIKU, which holds over eleven thousand users, would facilitate wider ranging and equitable sharing of data which she and her colleagues had gathered in collaboration with communities in Nunavut—making it securely accessible to the northern communities that she had worked in.

While I remain grateful that Twitter provided a tool to initiate this connection, in the end, my learning required a nuanced conversation. It is not by accident that this conversation led to a discussion of the need for platforms beyond corporate Twitter. There is a worrisome disconnect between the name "social" media and the issue inherent in the foundation of corporate platforms—the algorithms which seek to deliver us to advertisers, instead of toward these rich conversations with each other. Many Twitter users, including myself prior to my work with Arctic Focus, miss out on Arctic science stories and northern voices, like Maatalii, because of this. As I move through Twitter on my personal account, I now know

I must actively seek out certain stories and voices, and I wonder about the benefits of a non-profit social platform—on which one is encouraged to consume content about unfamiliar places.

### **Facebook: Comment Sections and Climate Change**

Facebook, as a tool to share Arctic science stories, has different features than Twitter and has offered different options. Although the two platforms share the focus of hyper-individualizing feeds, their different features by design and use forge and block different connections. Both Twitter and Facebook allow comment functions, but in comparison, the Arctic Focus Facebook comment section exceeds in popularity. Facebook also offers a range of emotional reactions to posts—anger, sadness, happiness, love, and like. By contrast, Twitter is more limited, unable to capture nuanced textual and affective feedback, offering only a like button. Users are limited to these binary actions—to like or not to like, to scroll up or down, to comment or not to comment.

As I scrolled through the Arctic Focus Twitter feed, I came across two captivating photos under #Nunavut taken by a user named Oolahnee Ziska. One, a polar bear lying in the snow in front of a pink sky. The other, its tracks imprinted in the snow. I quickly clicked the heart-shaped like button. I had likely seen photos of polar bear tracks in my lifetime, but I had never stopped to appreciate them. Oolahnee wrote, “yesterday we spent the morning getting ptarmigan, in the evening we headed to Tallurutit [Devon Island, Nunavut] and found bear tracks... this big boy found a seals den.” Scrolling through Oolahnee’s profile—a virtual getting-to-know the photographer—added something new. I asked Oolahnee if I could re-share the photos across the Arctic Focus platforms, with photo credit. On our Facebook page, the photo received thousands of reactions, including eighty nine comments. A few users, however, noticed the appearance of a sixth polar bear toe print. With my lack of knowledge, I worried I had made some sort of mistake in relaying

the information Oolahnee shared. To my relief, a northerner who follows Arctic Focus responded—this was likely two sets of polar bear tracks overlapping, which happens, for instance, if one is walking behind the other. Resonant in this example is not only the potential for knowledge sharing and learning on platforms, but also for community building amongst northerners and between north and south.

Yet, activity in the comment section on Facebook can pose problems. The frequent presence of bots, misinformation, and anger in these sections detracts from sustained and quality interaction, and can introduce misunderstandings. It is easy to worry about whether this feature does more harm than good, and media scholars have observed that, “while social media was initially praised for providing a platform for public discourse, user comments on social media often contain high levels of negative emotions, incivility, and antipolitical rhetoric” (Humphrecht et al. 1). Managing the Arctic Focus Facebook page, alarming and misleading comments appeared most often under Arctic science stories about climate change. A story on the record-breaking heatwaves hitting Antarctica and the Arctic, for instance, received over six hundred comments, some including thoughtless dismissals such as, “outright lies and fabrication”, and “Bs!” (Bergstrom et al.). The engagement that took place in the comment section of Oolahnee’s polar bear tracks, however, points to a more positive social potential for the conduct of exchange on platforms. I wonder how interactions of this kind—that encourage nuanced discussion and learning—are restricted by the binary nature of reaction features on corporate platforms.

Curiosities about the ways in which corporate interests limit the social aspect of communications technology is not new. Astra Taylor points to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who, in 1944, offer a framework to critique the role of profit in limiting social potentials of platforms (3). These scholars argued that, in the interest of profit, “powerful corporate interest” plays a role in diminishing democratic



forms of media (Taylor 3). These communications scholars provided a basis for understanding the restrictions in place that limit learning about the Canadian Arctic on corporate social media platforms; their critique also propels us toward considering the potential benefits of non-profit social platforms. Fuchs, for instance, suggests that while social media are incompletely social when they are “controlled and owned in a particularistic manner by an elite,” their potentials can help us form alternatives (257).

### **SIKU and Arctic Focus: Imagining Non-Profit Social Platforms**

In an interview with Barb Steele, creator of the SIKU mobile app and web platform, Joel Heath, speaks about the platform’s significance to Indigenous self-determination in research and climate change monitoring. I was excited to learn from their website disclosure, on SIKU, Indigenous users maintain full ownership, access and control of their rights and privacy. Having learned the risk of sharing knowledge on corporate platforms like Facebook—critiqued extensively for exploiting user data—SIKU presents a refreshing non-profit approach, illuminating that “platforms are not necessarily capitalist in character” (Fuchs 383, 313).

SIKU’s values of community-based learning and knowledge-sharing reminded me of the message of Arctic Focus, as a non-profit site which values collaboration. The shared values of community over profit these online spaces share are significant. Our ability to generate solutions to our current climate crisis is dependent on this kind of collaboration, between individuals from around the world. As Fuchs points out, “corporate mediation” occurring on platforms like Facebook and Twitter stifles our ability to communicate with one another, share and take in knowledge, collaborate and be creative together online (243). While recognizing the potentials of a truly social media on corporate platforms, it is necessary to look beyond them, as neoliberal capitalist platforms primarily operate to extract

user data rather than circulate knowledge and nuanced communication. Aspirationally, SIKU and Arctic Focus offer an encouraging model to begin thinking about how non-profit social media platforms might be oriented toward maximizing the human need for democratic forms of social engagement. My work with Arctic Focus has convinced me of a need for such online platforms and sites.

I began my internship knowing very little about the Canadian Arctic. In many ways, I still know very little about the Arctic. Learning about a place online is unquestionably different than immersing yourself in a place, culture, and community. As Jonathan Franzen recounts his journey to Antarctica, beholding a new and unfamiliar sight brings intense emotions—"I'd never before had the experience of beholding scenic beauty so dazzling that I couldn't process it, couldn't get it to register as something real" (para 29). Yet, images and stories online remain similarly moving. Digital images and texts are crucial to communicate about the climate crisis, as it is experienced by northern communities.

During my ARF internship, I relied on Twitter and Facebook as avenues for learning about Arctic climate challenges and culture, using their affordances to communicate with Arctic Focus followers about the Canadian Arctic. Yet, I think it is rhetorical to ask if I would have learned more, or learned sooner, about the Canadian Arctic had I been using a non-profit, community focused social platform—one prioritizing knowledge-sharing and northern voices, like SIKU. Similarly, I think about the difficulty of using corporate social media platforms to share the nuanced stories—drawn from Inuit communities and individuals in the Canadian Arctic—originally appearing with narrative detail on the Arctic Focus website. These platforms could not adequately communicate their nuance. Nor could they support meaningful community response. Images and stories of the Canadian Arctic play a crucial role in promoting understanding of the climate crises affecting northern communities

and propelling individuals towards collective action. As an integral step in developing solutions, there is a need to envision and build social media platforms capable of fostering nuance, knowledge-sharing, and learning about stories, science, people, and places that should not remain unfamiliar.

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