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Framing Alaskans and Greenlanders on the Melting Arctic Ice

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Abstract

The ice caps, glaciers, and sea ice of the Arctic are melting. Water levels are rising, CO₂ is escaping the permafrost, and wildlife is struggling to adapt amid die offs, but what about the people who live on the frontlines? I looked at the largest papers in Alaska and Greenland and found out there is more in common between the people at the top of the world than I expected. When your family can watch the glaciers disappearing year by year, there isn't room for skepticism. The facts are the facts, and while there are no solutions to be found here, the people who make their homes in the Arctic are watching for the consequences of anthropogenic climate change as it reshapes the lands and the seas.

Keywords: Alaska, anthropogenic climate change, Arctic, communication, Greenland, Native American tribes, newspaper framing

Introduction

Climate change is here and has been here for decades. It is no grand catastrophe you see all at once, rather by an alteration over decades of change with weather events turning extremes into new normal. What is lost isn't coming back as it used to, and it will be the communities and ecosystems of the Arctic Circle that will feel that change first. "Arctic land ice is melting, sea ice is decreasing, and permafrost is thawing. Changes in these Arctic elements are interconnected, and most interactions accelerate the rate of change. The changes affect infrastructure, economics, and cultures of people inside and outside of the Arctic, including in temperate and tropical regions, through sea level rise, worsening storm and hurricane impacts, and enhanced warming" (Moon et al., 2019, Abstract). While some observers argue that "Heat waves have always occurred," climate analysts such as Mike Sparrow of the U.N. World Meteorological Organization counter that "as global temperatures have risen, extreme heat waves are now occurring at least 10 times more frequently than a century ago" (Rising, 2019). These unusual conditions are hampering sea ice reforming. Ice melts and freezes seasonally, but melting is accelerating and freezing is slowing, creating an imbalance.

I will be looking at how news media in Alaska and Greenland, two regions differing in culture, language, and nationality but similar in remoteness to their respective national capitals (Greenland being an autonomous territory of Denmark) and their proximity to the North Pole and the Arctic Sea, report on the changes in the Arctic right outside their front doors. Reviewing five years of articles from the two regions' largest papers, I asked how was climate change and the melting Arctic glaciers and sea

ice treated, and how do they compare in framing? It is important we recognize the trends being formed, as that largely defines what becomes the consensus of people. The melting ice by itself means a rise in sea levels and a gradual loss of the world's coastlines. This has consequences on human, animal, and plant habitations in some regions of the world. More than rising water levels, we note other less obvious consequences like the disturbances in permafrost, which I will address later in the paper.

The frames explored in this paper, in order, are “Ecological Die Off,” “Cold Facts,” and “Past AND Future.” The Ecological Die Off and Past AND Future frames are evaluations of *Anchorage Daily News*, which over the course of the articles examined explored ecological and cultural consequences of these changes for the local wildlife and people. The coverage of the former demonstrates a worrisome record of ecological collapse over a long period of time, yet speeding up more recently. In the latter, the coverage reveals a complicated struggle between the desire to keep alive a people’s past and to sustain their livelihoods for the future while dealing with the complex realities of the present. Cold Facts as a frame represents the more limited coverage found in Greenland’s *Sermitsiaq.AG*, which is consistently factual, but offers little else. These two newspapers are the largest local newspapers of their locations. From these newspapers, I examine what the largest media voices in a US state and an Arctic nation are saying about what is happening outside their own homes.

Frames and Criteria

Before breaking down into their frame pieces articles from the two newspapers, I must elaborate on what patterns I am looking for. When framing, I look back to the

definitions given by Gitlin and Entman. Gitlin (1980) defines media frames as “Persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (p. 7). What is persistent across all articles and/or both papers? Does the author come to common sense conclusions? What trends can I find in the selections and omissions, of what is selected, what is given extra attention? Who in power was given a voice to shape the narrative? And what is notable about how they display the issue. I find this to be the most comprehensible in length and simple in language of the definitions provided.

Others might prefer the more academic language of Entman (1993) from a decade earlier, who describes frames as “selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Typically frames diagnose, evaluate, and prescribe” (p. 52). A more recent addition to the definition comes from Scheufele and Iyengar (2014), stating that “The concept of framing embodies a context-sensitive explanation for shifts in political beliefs and attitudes. Framing defines a dynamic, circumstantially bound process of opinion formation in which the prevailing modes of presentation in elite rhetoric and news media coverage shape mass opinion” (p. 619).

Whichever of the definitions you find the most understanding in, together these will define the framework for what we seek in the coming articles. Who is quoted? Who is quoted the most? Whose quotes are given emphasis, such as the last word? What

kinds of pictures, graphs, videos and/or graphics are used, and how do they affect the story? Are there any rhetorical devices? As I reviewed the newspapers *Anchorage Daily News* and *Sermitsiaq.AG*, I kept these questions in mind, judging the papers on their ideological leanings from how they spun stories through framing, and explaining how I came to conclusions about that framing.

Literature Review

Climate change is a long-recognized effect on the Arctic, and much has already been written on what has happened. The newspapers tell us what has happened from the perspective of laymen and women with the news industry in mind. Articles in peer-reviewed journals, meanwhile, offer an alternative academic and scientific perspective, which reach similar conclusions.

Witze (2019) points to the escalating nature of the Arctic spring and summer melting of the ice, a typically normal occurrence that has accelerated to become unsustainable. Arctic sea ice is being lost too quickly in waters like the Beaufort Sea and the central Arctic Ocean. By July of 2019, for instance, both ice coverage and thickness reached record-low levels, and by early August that year, there was no sea ice within 240 kilometers of the Alaskan coast. This indicates that sea ice is continuously declining. Furthermore, researchers anticipated that in comparing the losses of the warm months to the gains of the cold months, Greenland will have lost as much in 2019 as it did during the extreme year of 2012, if not more. This lack of ice will affect wildlife first, like the arctic walruses, which are marine mammals that are dependent on ice formation that cannot survive in water alone. Walruses require ice thick enough to support their weight to rest, give birth, and nurse their young. Without the environmental

conditions they are adapted and conditioned to, Witze warns, species like the walrus will see a die off in our lifetimes.

Moon et al. (2019) similarly warn that the permafrost of the Arctic is suffering widespread thawing. Thawed permafrost erodes away as it becomes severely waterlogged. This is very bad for everything on top of that permafrost. In Arctic communities, their infrastructure of roads, homes, and businesses, along with the electric grid and plumbing, all depend on that permafrost remaining. Moreover, traditional indigenous peoples rely on their cold cellars to maintain food. According to Moon et al., infrastructure damage since 2015 is predicted to reach 5.5 billion dollars by 2099 if the world's climate continues on its current trajectory. Half of this damage will be from thawing ground.

Moon et al. (2019) observe as well that annual ice loss from glaciers across the land and the neighboring Arctic ice caps are contributing significantly to sea level rise around the world. About 60% of the measured sea level rise can be attributed to the loss of this ice. Each year from 2003 to 2015, seas levels were recorded to rise 1.2mm on average. There is no evidence to suggest this is going to slow down. The next time scientists calculate the sea level rise, we should expect it to be 1.2mm or greater. Moon et al. (2019) explain that in the near term, "coastal communities worldwide are already experiencing more regular flooding, drinking water contamination, and coastal erosion" (Abstract) They argue that we should not be surprised if individuals, businesses, communities, and policy makers don't take meaningful action to reduce the deteriorating conditions, deterioration will not slow, and as we open more industry and pursue new energy and material-hungry technologies, we can expect the damage to worsen. As it

gets worse, we can in turn expect our more remote and coastal communities to be irrevocably harmed.

Jenkins et al. 2023 break down how animal species will struggle to survive as the glacial and sea ice paths that their species have walked across since time immemorial are lost. This threat is apparent in migratory species such as caribou, which depend on ancestral paths in herds. For these caribou herds, along with other species, population fragmentation and habitat loss can be extinction level events. As the landscape breaks and melts away, finding food sources and maintaining their species populations through connectivity will become increasingly difficult and eventually impossible

Jenkins et al. (2023) advise that healthy ecosystems are carefully balanced through evolution and adaptation. The decline of a species is enough to trigger a decline in other seemingly unrelated species, which can create a chain reaction of ecological collapse. Yet the damage isn't just from broader anthropomorphic climate change at work here. Humans have more actively come into the wilderness in search of resources. Through our alterations of the landscape—setting up of fences, breaking the ice, and consuming or trampling the resources species like the caribou need to survive—we are actively creating discontinuity of the land and disruption of species such as the caribou herds in pursuit of profits. Conservation of the Arctic ecosystem will require a greater understanding of connectivity and a stronger push in what we can do to impede further habitat loss and undue fragmentation.

This scholarship presents a commonality in that the authors all focus on the current effects of a warmer climate in the Arctic region. This is the region of the world that, as Moon et al. (2019) declare, is distant and shrinking, melting, dissolving, thawing,

and collapsing to the point that it becomes forgettable or at worst dismissed as too late to fix! The problem is important to address now because it is not yet too late. Across the northern edge of the European continent, Central Russia, Greenland, Iceland, the Canadian Northern Territories, and the US state of Alaska, there are a lot of people living in the Arctic Circle. These people and the ecosystems they live in are the first to feel the profound effects of progressive sea ice loss year to year. But we must not mistake that these effects will not also affect the rest of the world through rising sea levels and species die off.

The potential for climate change throughout the Arctic to become an out-of-control feedback loop is a key warning across the scholarship. Increased heat leads to wildfires even in places many imagine as frozen emptiness. Fire that burns away vital trees that would normally absorb CO₂, instead releases more CO₂ back into the atmosphere. Wildfires near the Arctic create hot spots that contribute to more melting permafrost. In a myriad of ways, we see that the effect on the climate from global warming contributes to sea ice loss directly and indirectly. If humans as a global community don't jump on this soon and dramatically, the feedback loop of released carbon in the permafrost could accelerate the problem beyond our chances for recovery.

What I find aggravating about such scholarship is that authors raise the alarm, and they tell us why we should care using hard facts and meticulously collected data, but we don't see solutions. While the information is valuable, it is not transformative. People who care already know the planet is becoming unsustainable for life little by little. The "how" isn't as necessary for us at this point as the "how not" to help address

this gap, I will later address ideas for dramatic solutions to the slow environmental violence and decadal decay of our biosphere.

Disaster in Alaska

What we see when we break down the coverage of the *Anchorage Daily News* (ADN) is a paper that is good on facts and good on the range of topics, with long articles offering in-depth interviews and histories, but, like the peer-reviewed articles, short on solutions and not directing blame. The ADN is the largest newspaper in Alaska and is operated by the Binkley Co LLC, the business of the Binkley family of Alaska. The Binkleys of note are Ryan, Wade, James, and Kai Binkley (siblings) and their father John Binkley. John is a Republican politician and riverboat business owner. The siblings run the LLC with Ryan in the lead. Ryan's education and early work experience was in petroleum engineering. He and his siblings are also avid riverboaters. Keep this context in mind, because while not being aggressive against fossil fuels, there is a focus in ADN's journalism on the degradation of Alaska's wilderness. The common occurrence of climate scientists getting the first and last word in the articles, which include graphs, maps, and pictures of ecological decay without rhetoric, leads me to believe ADN articles might not go so far as to be activism, but you can trust them for facts. We can name this frame "Ecological Die Off" because the reporting is very consistent on how the changing landscape and conditions for survival are pushing arctic animals' adaptability to the breaking point.

Wildlife is struggling to adapt to the new reality of reduced sea ice and glacial decay, which are not guaranteed to be strong or plentiful enough to support wildlife migration and feeding. In turn, some creatures are adapting, with strange changes in

their behavior to survive. Killer whales are preying on the endangered bowhead whale, driving them closer to extinction (DeMarban, 2020). New ecological niches are similarly forming which are not always advantageous to the current wildlife. The caribou of the Western Arctic Herd, for instance, struggle against the “shrubification” of their trails. The new plants aren’t what the herd can eat and make moving more difficult. Herds are therefore changing their behavior too as the land changes. (Rosen, 2025). An island of sea birds a man watched over for 50 years was abandoned by all the birds when polar bears swam in, as the bears could no longer hunt on the ice. The birds and their eggs were not enough for the bears, but the bears are driven to eat where they can with reduced hunting on the ice. We see that one displaced species displaces another, then moves on (Wohlforth & Holmes, 2024).

We too may eventually be displaced since much of what we built in the region is on permafrost. Strong in the cold, that infrastructure won’t support tribal lifestyles, let alone city life, once the land becomes a bog. These changes will release all the trapped carbon too. If enough CO₂ currently trapped in the permafrost is eventually released, we could no longer be able to stop climate change even with our best efforts (Freedman, 2019). Like everything else, there will be a knock-on effect. Sailors must brace for shipping difficulties because less ice means more wind. Harsher weather patterns also mean more water blown inland, flooding towns and blowing down power lines. For now, ice protects the coast from erosion and the coastal communities from the winds and the encroaching sea (Krakow, 2019). People will have to decide their day’s activities as much on the wind as the rain and snow in coastal villages like Kotzebue, Alaska.

The news in Alaska even considers how Arctic climate change will affect Greenland. The weather might seem mild to some observers, but the ADN and UN recognize that mild is hot for the ice of the Arctic. In a heat wave in 2019, over 11 billion tons of ice melted in just one day, reaching 217 billion tons by the end of July that year. That kind of loss is not sustainable. Ice will come back, but there will be less of it and thinner. Thin ice melts faster, failing to thicken and build up (Rising, 2019). Alaskans can see what is coming their way, as the freeze has slowed down yearly in the Chukchi Sea in Northwest Alaska. Mild freezing means there won't be enough ice growth before summer, leading to the ice melting worse the following year even if there are colder temperatures (Hovey, 2019).

Disaster in Greenland

In comparison to ADN, *Sermitsiaq.AG* is harder to analyze, complicated further when relying on Google Translate. The ownership of this paper is not clear. While no owner is listed, the paper is funded by Media House Sermitsiaq.AG, which itself is also not forthcoming about where its funding source or who sets policy. While there are not even advertisements on the main page and it is a much smaller paper, *Sermitsiaq.AG* is otherwise remarkably similar to ADN. My criticisms and praises are also the same. *Sermitsiaq.AG* lets scientists speak without injecting a counter narrative from any industry. Yet, like ADN, the paper does not present a call to action. It offers neutral journalism, in other words “cold journalism.” We can therefore use the frame “Cold Facts” going forward. While the paper’s factual information is good, its coverage is distant and infrequent, avoiding rhetorical devices with no apparent special interests; articles in the paper tend provide just sheets of facts.

Notably, however, one article from early in this review devoted the lion's share of its space to a debate between scientists, one group decrying another scientist who had spoken so openly about the coming climate disaster. The critics claimed it was too political, while also downplaying the role of humans on climate change. This platforming on its own offered a disappointing early impression for the paper. But the article did end with the activist scientist getting his response in (Jorgensen, 2019). Although a lot of attention was given to the opponents, the activist scientist made the most meaningful contribution at the conclusion. A back-and-forth like this again would not appear again in other articles.

From there the trend of the articles was informative on highlighting the changing climate in the Arctic without being alarmist. Again, climate scientists in each case got the last word, having the floor to themselves to make their case that the condition of the ecosystem is deteriorating. Image wise, *Sermitsiaq.AG* tends to be uninspiring with its pictures, whether locations or (Ritzau Bureau, 2023) or lonely manmade structures (Veirum, 2021). *Sermitsiaq.AG*'s pictures relate to the story but add little to them.

Sermitsiaq.AG, for how close it is to the Arctic and with how much Greenland has come up in American news recently, doesn't have much to say about the Arctic in the last five years, seeming to understand the science but not cover its importance. One article notes that "Reality almost overtakes the climate models that we have used so far to calculate melting" (Ritzau, 2020), recognizing that glaciers are melting and sea levels are rising "faster than expected." Even with this focus on the rising sea levels and giving voice to activist scientists, the paper tends not to emphasize the implications of the rising sea levels on coastal communities. Turnowsky (2019) reports that Greenlanders

like activist and author Aqqaluk Lynge knows that the world looks at Greenland as the “ground zero” for a climate catastrophe, yet Greenland is not given a seat at the table with world leaders. This reporting is the notable exception to other articles having no plan. Although short and lacking details, Turnowsky’s article is refreshing, finally saying we need an ambitious plan both in government and business to manage the climate.

While Greenland has yet to have a seat at the global table, world leaders are beginning to listen. Coverage in *Sermitsiaq.AG* observes that “In their latest main report from 2014, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimated that the global temperature had risen by approximately 0.9 degrees since industrialization.” Given those estimates, the panel determined that “The solution was that it was necessary to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 40-70 percent in the period 2010 to 2050”; otherwise, it will become “out of reach to limit global warming to 1.5 or 2 degrees, unless there are immediate, rapid and very large reductions in greenhouse gas emissions” (Ritzau, 2021). Greenland, though large in landmass, is not a politically powerful country. Despite being on the frontlines in such global declarations, it is not actively in the discussions that will shape its future.

Tribal Conflict

Returning to Alaska, we can view the Arctic ice melt-off from another, more human, perspective. In *Disaster in Alaska* and *Disaster in Greenland*, we have examined the reporting on ecological and environmental ramifications. Now we will examine reporting of the impacts on Alaska’s Native people. Unlike in Alaska, the indigenous people of Greenland make up most of its population, so we can assume the articles already cited from *Sermitsiaq.AG* are reasonably aligned with the indigenous

population's general perspective. We will therefore look at ADN's reporting on the people who live on the frontlines of these changes, trying to preserve their past against both present difficulties and an encroaching future. Looking at reporting of what these people have to say about their experiences and what they see with their own eyes, we can assess how ADN conveys this perspective to the rest of Alaska. Naming this frame "Past AND Future" draws attention to the message that sustainable subsistence living of the past is compatible with a green future.

In the north and west of Alaska, melting ice and Alaskan oil field drilling are having knock-on effects on the environment. These effects present a cultural crisis for the Alaskan Native tribes that live in the area. Oil money has been good for prosperity, and a people who chose to live carrying on traditions of their people into the modern age are divided on how important these traditions and the environment will be to their future. While the economic boom to the community from oil companies gets its fair chance in articles, the trend here is that the decline of the caribou herds, the difficulty of maintaining tribal traditions, and the infrastructural collapse from thawing permafrost are given greater weight. Local tribal activists and climate scientists frequently get the last and lion's share of the word in articles. Visually, we get pictures like "Water surrounds displaced graves at the cemetery in Nuiqsut, Alaska" (Eilperin, 2019), in which a graveyard is flooded with crosses no longer standing straight.

Published in ADN, we can give Eilperin's (2019) story of Nuiqsut the same considerations as the ecological stories from earlier. I believe the Binkleys probably are fond of the oil industry but also have a close tie to Alaska's wilderness, especially its waterways. There aren't any comparable stories from the 2019 or later in *Sermitsiaq.AG*

about indigenous Greenlanders. The Kalaallit people are the majority of the indigenous population in Greenland, meaning any news about the people of Greenland is also likely news about the Kalaallit (Løvstrøm, 2023). The difference between ADN and *Sermitsiaq.AG* here is that Nuiqsut is written about like its people are far away, whereas the Kalaallit in *Sermitsiaq.AG* speak as themselves.

We find that the people most affected, not scientists, have the say in this ADN article. That is nonetheless impactful because not every story needs to be just about the climate data. The leaders of the tribe and the community who have conflicting interests in preserving their history and land versus living more prosperous lives from oil drilling are not made out to be either good guys or bad guys, and their stories are not drowned out by the numbers. Eilperin (2019) gives Nuiqsut's tribal administrator more prominent coverage across the article, but the depiction of Nuiqsut is not one-sided. We find here that ADN respects the voices of the Alaskan Natives in Nuiqsut and lets them speak for themselves.

Comparison

Even people otherwise far apart have a lot more in common when they live that far north and detached from the world. I honestly expected more distinction between the perspectives of Alaskan Americans and Greenlanders, but being in the “hot seat” of big environmental changes may give a shared perspective despite national differences. More people in Greenland are closer to the Arctic than in Alaska, but their information and media portrayals are the same. What is different is how important the coverage appears to be in Alaska compared to Greenland. Both *Anchorage Daily News* and *Sermitsiaq.AG* recognize the dangers climate change poses to their ecosystems, but

ADN puts out longer articles, more frequently and with greater visualization on the topic. This gives the sense that *Sermitsiaq.AG* knows but doesn't care about the impacts to the extent that ADN appears to. As *Sermitsiaq.AG* does not rely on main-page or in-article advertising, advertiser influence does not appear to explain this more limited coverage. I leave the possibility open, however, that without identifiable corporate funding or a wealthy family behind *Sermitsiaq.AG*, the news organization could simply be doing what it can with the resources it has.

I am disappointed by the lack of solutions offered, regardless of funding. The two papers are climate oriented with a deaf ear to climate skepticism, but the facts they present don't do anything by themselves. ADN does acknowledge some resistance among the Alaskan Native tribes to big oil money, which has made their lives easier but at a cost to the environment and the sustainability of their traditions. This reporting is all though. ADN portrays some individuals standing up amongst their people in defying big oil expansion, but the wider peoples of Alaska and Greenland aren't being reported, at least, as standing up in a similar way. We know the climate is leading to disaster, and through these articles we can see in what ways, but we don't know how to stop it.

Altogether, the framing in both papers on the topic is good, but the problem remains out of control. In a few more years, the greenhouse gas release of CO₂ into the atmosphere, both from the melting permafrost and increasingly common wildfires making hot spots on the map, will be enough to keep the effects of climate change going in a feedback loop. Even if humans could meet carbon zero goals, if this were to come after the Arctic is too far melted, the process would continue on its own beyond our ability to stop it. There is a metaphorical timer ticking down to an irreversible loss of

containment to the problem, and our present actions are only speeding the time down. The disasters will hit the disadvantaged native populations up in the northernmost portions of Alaska first, then Greenland will suffer the same destruction of its infrastructure built on permafrost. Eventually all this melted ice is going to affect sea levels for coastal communities across the world, while more warm water is going to lead to stronger storms across the globe, which we are all going to pay the price for. The danger doesn't stop with people on the fringes of society. It's a real issue that some are outright ignoring, but they won't be able to ignore forever. Coverage from papers like *ADN* and *Sermitsiaq.AG* is helping, but for a problem as catastrophic as what is coming, even this news coverage isn't enough. Observation and acceptance can be step one. But step two and three are having a plan and acting on that plan, respectively. We are too far behind on action, and the timer isn't slowing.

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