

# Arctic Waves

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Radio News and Stories from Canada's Arctic Region

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## Red Radios in Canada's Arctic

### Gjoa Haven, Nunavut: A Community Profile

<http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/ssognc/aCommunityProfile/index.html>

... in the 1990's, satellite dishes were installed in all the Nunavut communities which bring in cable television. We get 25 TV stations through our local cable company (Qiqitaq Co-op). They range from the Sports Network (TSN) to Much Music (MTV) to a channel for youth (YTV), six or seven channels from Canadian cities (ITV-Edmonton, ONTV-Ontario, etc) and eight or nine USA channels from Los Angeles, Detroit, Chicago, etc. Some residents also choose to purchase and install their own home-based satellite dishes, but reception is poor with the smaller dishes because of our location so far North.

Many Inuit children have Nintendo 64, Gameboy and other such entertainment, as well as home computers and computer games. By June, 2000 all Nunavut communities will have another satellite dish installed which will provide a local internet server for each community. The advent of satellite technology has opened much of the Arctic to communications systems similar to any urban area in Canada or the United States.

Within the community and the local area many people use shortwave radios. In Gjoa Haven many households have a CB Radio to communicate

with each other and to talk to Hamlet water trucks and sewage trucks for ordering a fill-up or pump-out. When people travel outside the community and go to their camp for a weekend or for the summer, quite often they bring a Red Radio, which is a crystal based unit capable of communicating over several hundred kilometers.

These radios are light and durable and run on D batteries. Camps talk to each other at night when transmissions are clear and, in the event of a medical or other emergency, a red radio can be used to call for help or have a helicopter dispatched. ❖

*In the picture below, see the "Red Radio" to the right of the camp stove.*



**The following article has more to say about Red Radios, but also gives a fascinating insight into community radio in the Arctic.**

From the book *Hunters and Gatherers in the Modern World: Conflict, Resistance, and Self-Determination*, edited by Peter P. Schweitzer, Megan Biesele and Robert K. Hitchcock, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000.

Chapter 5, article by Jean L. Briggs : Modern Inuit Community

I am going to limit my discussion here to just one of the new forums, one that I find exceptionally interesting in the way it combines old and new principles in managing social tensions. I observed its operation in only one community, but I am told that in one form or another it has developed in many other native settlements as well. I refer to local radio.

There are actually two sorts of local radio in the settlement. One of these is citizen's band (CB), colloquially known as "red radio" because of the color of the instruments. Many, if not most, households have red radios and use them extensively, not only to keep contact between settlement and camp, or between camps when family members are out on the land, but also to communicate within the settlement, even when the people called on the radio also have telephones.

The other kind of local radio is the ordinary, centralized sort, with a "station" in a room of the local government building. I think this radio plays music for some hours every day, and perhaps there are other programs, too; but I never found anyone listening to any program other than the one I describe here. Most people seem to listen with religious regularity to this program, a phone-in hour that comes on twice a day, at lunch and supper time (noon and early evening). People who phone the host, a bilingual Inuk, either leave messages that the host relays to the community in both Inuktitut and English or speak their own pieces in either language, and—if it is a meeting notice or an announcement of some other public event, or in any case when the speaker requests it—the host will translate into the other language.

The phone-in hour is regularly used by settlement

officers and organizational leaders of all sorts to make announcements and exhortations to the community at large. Meeting notices, promulgation of new bylaws, public health advice and warnings, reminders to individuals who have appointments to see visiting medical specialists, mundane school announcements, and lectures on the importance of sending one's children to school are all made through this channel, rather than on red radio, perhaps because almost all households have ordinary radios, whereas CBs, being more expensive, are more unevenly distributed.

While many of these organizational messages are "purely" practical, evoking a mundane response, others are likely to have emotionally charged connotations for some hearers: "The water in Fish Lake has been tested and has been found not safe to drink"; "Young people have to be at home by 11 o'clock on school nights"; "If hunters abandon animal carcasses they will be fined"; "Because of the danger of rabies, unchained dogs will be shot"; "Now that it's spring, we should clean up around the houses so that the town will look beautiful."

Both radios are used to send personal messages. Some of these are practical, too—domestic requests, invitations—or simply informational: "Johnny, come home, your dinner's ready"; "Susie, come home and stay with the baby, I have to go to the store"; "I need a ride to the fishing lake"; "Michael, you're welcome to sleep and eat here if you want to"; "I had a phone call from Mary [in Montreal] today; she says a big hello to Michael and Ruby and Sally."

But again it is clear that such messages, though matter-of-fact on the surface, have a potential for communicating far more than the words themselves: "I care for you" and perhaps "You are heedless of that care"; "Why don't you ever stay home and be useful instead of running around town and neglecting your responsibilities?"; "Why don't any of my kin who have transportation ever think to offer to take me along?"; "My daughter and I forgive you for treating her badly"; "Mary's special friends are Michael, Ruby, Sally," and so on.

Other personal messages have more explicit emotional charges, both positive and negative, though they are phrased in general terms: "I am grateful to

the people who helped me when my snowmobile broke down [out on the land]"; "I am an old man and it's hard for me to carry my groceries, nevertheless the young people of this town never offer to help me"; and "I don't like it when people come into my house, drunk, on Friday nights and make a mess."

Finally, some few messages are both highly charged and explicitly personal: A woman makes acid remarks about the defects of another's children; a mother pointedly asks her married daughter if she has taken an object belonging to her mother.

Most interesting of all, a daughter sends her mother a *loving* message that makes reference to the latter's recently deceased husband, and she tells me that her decision to use the radio was motivated by the fear that her mother would cry.

Notice, now, how many of these messages are capable of generating conflict or just interpersonal discomfort. Troublesome on the community level are the promulgation of controversial bylaws and exhortations on divisive, symbolically loaded subjects—indeed, exhortations on *any* subject, which, by attempting to influence, intrude on autonomy of decision-making and freedom of action. On the individual level, messages can cause difficulties not only by expressing antagonistic personal interests—making accusations, implied and explicit—but also, as my last example indicates, by raising the spectre of a painful past. Why broadcast all of this socially disruptive matter, especially the personal tensions, which, one might imagine, could be handled more discreetly on the telephone or more sensitively face to face? If the characteristics of radio and the ways in which the radio messages are formulated are compared with patterns of conflict management in camp life, I think some light may be shed on this question.

First of all, in camp life people feared and avoided confrontation, preferring to say nothing about disagreements, resentments, and other painful feelings, rather than risk social unpleasantness. Nevertheless, sometimes tensions built up in the camp to the point that it was difficult not to express them. I have tried to demonstrate that this dilemma exists in exacerbated form in the settlement. One still finds fear of confrontation, while at the same time, the diversity of lifestyles and the adoption of the European prac-

tice of living by rules and regulations, instead of by subtle interpersonal negotiation and silent adaptation, mean that matters certain to be controversial must frequently be expressed.

We have seen that in former days the dilemma was resolved—or at least addressed in extreme cases—by the public song duel [*Editor's Note: see item at end of this article, explaining the song duel*], which allowed antagonists to express and conceal hostility at one and the same time. Radio, I shall argue, has some of the same characteristics as the song duel. I think particularly of publicity, ambiguity, and the complex role of the audience.

Communications broadcast over radio are of course received by a large audience, either directly from the radio or indirectly via the gossip network. In the case of red radio, they are even heard in other communities and out on the land, in widely dispersed hunting and fishing camps. Eckert and Newmark (1980: 200-201) point out, with regard to the song duel, that the presence of an audience, whether visibly present or merely symbolic—referred to in vague terms in a song—can intensify both accusation and sanction by causing persons who may feel uncomfortable about their behavior to imagine that there are many critical eyes upon them. The public lectures and prayers that addressed the delinquent in a camp served the same purpose of isolating the offender in the presence of a phalanx of critics; today it is radio that provides the audience.

Eckert and Newmark (1980: 200) also point out that when the *community* is perceived as critical, some of the burden of responsibility for criticism is removed from the individual accuser. In this way, the confrontation is diluted and so made safer: for the accuser, who has the backing of the community; for the accused, who need not fear retribution at the hand of a single irate individual; and for the community, which can, more easily than an angry antagonist, reincorporate offenders and so reconstitute itself.

Reintegration following castigation is also facilitated when offenders, instead of being clearly identified, are left to imagine their own offense, real or potential, and to worry about its possible consequences. Thus we come to the subject of ambiguity—an important quality of song duels, as mentioned earlier. There

is ambiguity in the radio messages, too, though it is not created in the same way as in the song contests. The songs were art forms, shaped of metaphors and allusions, and the audience responded to them on this level. Moreover, they were often ironic, and they could easily be interpreted as joking. At the same time, by the very nature of a “duel”—and also because of the intimate, face-to-face nature of life in a camp—it was always clear to whom a song was addressed. None of this is true of radio. The ambiguity of a radio message is based, first, on the fact that speakers often refrain from naming both themselves and the people they are talking about, and, second, on the vague, general, or altogether implicit manner in which criticism is usually phrased. Of course, many of those who listen will recognize the voice of the speaker and will know to whom the messages are addressed, even when no names are mentioned; and some will take personally the criticism, explicit or implied. Nevertheless, speakers who have not named the individuals they have in mind can deny any personal reference.

Even when the intended recipient of the message is named, I have suggested that confrontation in the radio situation is diluted and controlled by the fact that the recipient is at a distance and need not be met face to face. Moreover, as in the song duel, the audience helps to control the uncomfortable situation by witnessing it and by implicitly judging both accuser and accused. The fact that all participants, both antagonists and audience, are sitting quietly and separately at home, addressing their critical comments only to fellow listeners in the household, inhibits both the dyadic escalation of hostility and the development of active factions.

Another point of comparison concerns the formulation of response to an emotionally charged message. Eckert and Newmark (1980: 192) have told us that in song duels, antagonists were required not to respond directly, defensively, but rather to counter with a statement on a different subject; and I have mentioned that in everyday camp life, too, argument was strongly proscribed. I noted only two instances of response to an item that was broadcast, and both demonstrate the enduring strength of old patterns in the new context and show us something of how radio works. In one case, a young woman, in her official capacity as representative of a community

organization, had broadcast a message urging all young people to help with village cleanup. In the next session of the phone-in program, an elder picked up and repeated her message but without acknowledging or directly replying to it. The young woman was supported but a faction was not created and “autonomous” expression was preserved. The other case was that of a woman who repeatedly criticized the moral character of another woman’s children. The woman who was the butt of the attacks told me that she refrained from replying for five years; then finally she turned the accusation back on her antagonist’s children: “It’s *your* children, not mine.. .” And, said she: “She never said another word.” So great is the fear of direct rebuttal.

In sum, in radio talk as in the song duel, conflict is embedded and isolated within a formal—one might say, ritualized—context, concealed behind ambiguity, and publicized before an audience, which can perform several functions: giving (imagined) support; providing (imagined) sanctions; creating safe distance between potential opponents; and, through all of the above, controlling antagonism and preventing actual conflict. Talking on the radio allows people in emotionally uncomfortable relationships to avoid speaking face to face or even on the telephone, either of which media would create a dangerously dyadic situation. As did the song duel, radio allows people to confront without confronting and to respond without responding. The value of the radio is indicated by the fact that in the socially stressful environment of the settlement, the public is called on, not just occasionally in rare and exceptionally troublesome cases, but every day. Indeed, twice a day.

Finally, radio does not serve the community only by airing troublesome situations in a relatively safe mode; we have seen that it also provides a forum for the expression of warm and positive sentiments like gratitude, which can create and strengthen bonds among community residents. Not least in importance, the radio is a focus for participation in settlement life: almost everybody talks, and listens to their fellows talking, on one kind of radio or the other, or both. So radio, like the song duel, draws the diverse and fragmented community together in more than one way.

Nevertheless, lest this picture, complex though it

be, leave too tidy an impression, I will conclude by mentioning that in this community there are— not surprisingly—traditionally minded individuals, even in younger generations, who disapprove of using the radio to “complain.” ❖

### **Song Duels**

Certain Inuit groups, including some from the Central Arctic and Greenland, used ridicule in the form of song duels as a means of conflict resolution. For example, two men who had failed to resolve a conflict by other means would secretly compose derisive songs about their adversary. The men’s wives would also learn these songs. The whole camp gathered in a large igloo to observe the song duel. The wives would sing their husband’s song in turn, while the husband would beat a drum and dance in the middle of the igloo. The entire community would observe the competition and thoroughly enjoy the wit and humour of the songs. Usually there would be no specific mention of the particular reason for the conflict in the song. The contest was really comparing the character and resourcefulness of the two opponents.

Each contestant would disparage his opponent’s character, sexual vitality, honesty, strength, ability to hunt and virtually any aspect of a person’s life where they would be sensitive to criticism. The person who had composed the most cutting, humorous and witty song received the most positive response from the audience and would be considered the winner. This would effectively end the conflict and life would return to normal. [*The Inuit Way: A Guide to Inuit Culture*, by Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2006]

From the CBC website in December

### **Announcer-Interviewer (in Cree Language) (CBC North-Quebec)**

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CBC North - Québec is seeking candidates for the position of Announcer-Interviewer for our Cree Language radio programs, based in Montréal.

We are looking for individuals who are interested in local, regional and national events affecting people who live in Northern Quebec Cree communities. As an Announcer-Interviewer you will be responsible for planning, writing, and announcing daily radio program in Cree broadcast in Northern Quebec.

The successful candidate will need to be available to travel to Cree communities and may work on flexible schedule (may include evenings and weekends).

The ideal candidate should have the following:  
Bachelor's degree or the equivalent.

Three (3) years' on-air experience or the equivalent.

Very good knowledge of the broadcast language (Cree).

Good knowledge of both official languages (French and English).

In-depth knowledge of aboriginal and political issues facing the Northern Communities is a must.

Candidates may be subject to audio test (diction, voice) in Cree and knowledge testing.

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