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## **A Comment on East Greenland Online. Media Commenting Systems as Spaces for Public Debate with a Focus on East Greenland in the Greenlandic Media**

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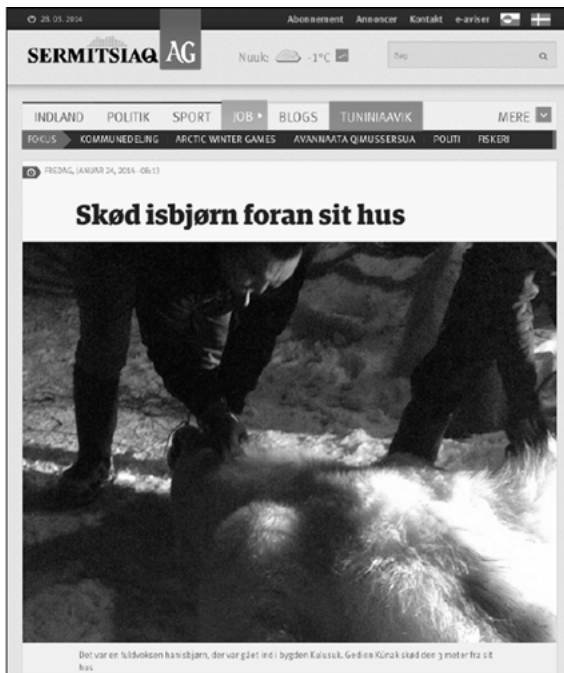
## A Comment on East Greenland Online

Media Commenting Systems as Spaces for Public Debate with  
a Focus on East Greenland in the Greenlandic Media

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*Jóhanna Björk Sveinbjörnsdóttir*

Image 1



The article that caught my attention: “Shot a polar bear in front of his house.” The caption reads: “It was a full-grown he-bear that had come into Kulusuk settlement. Gedion Kúnak shot it in three meters distance from his house.” (my translation from Danish)

“Shot a polar bear in front of his house,” was the sentence that accompanied the above image (Image 1.). It appeared several times in my *Facebook* feed on January 24, 2014. This was a shared link from the Greenlandic newspaper *Sermitsiaq* AG regarding Gedion Kúnak, a hunter in Kulusuk who had shot a polar bear from his doorstep. His daughter Justine, then 22 years old, had spotted the bear that was standing in the same spot she had just stood with her friends moments earlier. According to East Greenlandic tradition, the first to see the bear is the official hunter. This was Justine, but Gedion was the shooter. As a licensed hunter, Gedion is allowed to shoot polar bears according to an established quota (currently set at 25 animals annually for the region). To hunt a polar bear is a sought after achievement in Greenland. Over his lifetime, Gedion has shot more than fifteen. Friends and family, as well as other readers of the online article, congratulated Gedion and Justine in the comments section below the article.

What struck me about the news, apart from relief that Justine and her friends were safe and the joy expressed over a friend’s achievement, was that—unlike most of the occasional news from East Greenland, often about violence or negative social challenges—this news was neutral. It was a simple description of the event together with a few words from Gedion. Amongst the congratulatory comments, the killing of the bear was described as barbaric and unnecessary: “Why is nobody asking if Gedion has a license?” “STOP KILLING THEM!” In the comments of the following days, a lively debate ensued between supporters of polar bear hunting and those against it. Some East Greenlanders stood up for their culture against heavy accusations from Danes and West Greenlanders.

This instance provides an interesting lens through which to study Greenlandic media. The country’s population is scattered and isolated. Internet access is still limited, and printed media travels slowly due to logistical cost and weather. Moreover, Greenlandic media is state-run. For the last three years, I have spent my summers in East Greenland. During the long months in between, I try to keep up with current affairs via the online news from *Sermitsiaq* AG and KNR. However, there is very little coverage of the East, so I depend on *Facebook* and e-mails from friends to receive news from the area. The story about Gedion is a good example of how these new online platforms have become official public spaces to hold debate, and thus a means of some sort of “commenting-activism,” where readers can add the East Greenlandic point of view to the published article. To understand the phenomenon better, I engaged in ethnographic research, specifically participant observation, with readers of Greenlandic online news. Commenting systems are connected to *Facebook* and provide easy access to a selected number of diverse users for further interviews. Until now, most research on the subject of “commenting” has been for the benefit of the media and journalism outlets, with regard to providing information relating to revenues, falling readership and audience engagement. In this research, I focus on the user’s point of view—that of the readers and those who have made

comments—to gain ethnographic insight about East Greenland and changing cultural traditions within the media landscape.

The polar bear debate reflects some of East Greenland's under-representation and misrepresentation in the media. In this article I take a closer look at commenting systems in a wider context to see if it is common practice for East Greenlanders to use the open platform for debate. To give the required background, I sketch out the split between the east and west of Greenland. Both Appadurai's (1990) theory of the *mediascape* and *imagined worlds*, and Habermas's (1989, 1996, 2006) concept of public space and common opinion, help to frame this investigation. By drawing up the Greenlandic *mediascape*, I establish a base to discuss the potential of commenting systems as public space that exists across geographical boundaries.

## **EAST GREENLAND AND THE “NATURE-PEOPLE”**

There are two stories to be told about Greenland: there is a story about Greenland in general, and a more specific story of the east coast.

The largest segment of Greenland's population of 56,114 lives on the west coast. The majority are Inuit, mixed with a large community of several generations of Danish migrants. There exists a long history of international contact. For example, Nordic Vikings lived in the southwest between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, eventually dying from starvation because they did not adapt to their new conditions. Later, Dutch and Norwegian hunters came to set up whaling stations. Eventually Danish/Norwegian Hans Egede established a missionary station in Nuuk in 1721, which later became the colony. Although Greenland was granted home rule in 1979, and self-rule in 2009, the legacy of colonialism is still apparent; the Greenlandic language only became the official language in 2009, thus placing the Danish language second.

Specifically, in East Greenland today 3,266 people live in five small settlements and the capital of the area, Tasiilaq. The area is called Ammassalik, or Tunu in Greenlandic, which means “the back-side.” Due to extreme geographical isolation, the people of the east coast were unknown to others. They lived as nomadic hunters until Danish merchant Gustav Holm discovered the area in 1885. Here, people speak East Greenlandic, also called Tunumiit, a distinct dialect of Greenlandic. Greenlandic is their second language and Danish their third. Tunumiit is traditionally a spoken language without official spelling, therefore very few books exist in the language. Rough weather, geographical isolation, high travel costs, and limited internet access, all serve to maintain the isolation of East Greenlanders for a large part of the year. Lately, East Greenland has been catching up to modernity with incredible speed; the oldest among the population who grew up living in turf houses in the winter and sealskin tents during the

summer, now use smartphones and travel by helicopter. Nonetheless, nature continues to shape living conditions and the area remains fairly isolated for nine months of the year. As before, people depend on the surrounding environment, themselves, and each other. Agriculture is impossible in East Greenland, a granite archipelago largely covered in ice and snow year-round. Hunting and fishing make the most efficient use of resources. These practices are on a small scale—involving methods that use small motorboats, snow scooters, and dogsleds—to sustain the family. There is no bank, only two ATMs, both located in Tasiilaq. Internet is expensive and limited. There is no public transport; people hitch rides with the small boats. Healthcare, social services, education, religion, and police are gradually being centralized in Tasiilaq. There is one supermarket, the state-run Pilersuisoq, where bras and bullets sit next to each another on the shelf and wine is kept behind the counter. During the three summer months, Pilersuisoq is stocked with products imported from Denmark, when the cargo ships can gain access through the ocean ice. Everything must last from the last ship in October until the first ship that arrives in late June. Therefore, the staple diet for an East Greenlandic family still comes from the ocean; their large freezers are filled with fish, seal and whale, along with blueberries, crowberries, some edible local herbs ... and the occasional polar bear.

Many of these descriptions also apply to other rural areas of Greenland, but collectively they form a lifestyle unique to the East. The language barrier is in some ways indicative of the split between East and West: East Greenlanders understand Greenlandic and the culture of those who speak it, but not vice versa.

*Image 2*



Landscape photographs from a dog-sled hunting trip. Bilingual caption in Greenlandic and Danish: “Sled tour today :)” (my translation). Photographed and posted on *Facebook*, by Mads Poulsen.

Early history texts in West Greenlandic schools mention three types of wild people: “wild-wild,” “precious-wild,” and “our own wild”. Too often East Greenlanders are still considered “wild nature-people”—translated from Danish: *vilde naturmennesker*—by Greenlanders and Danes. These ideas influence the whole of Greenlandic society. Robert Petersen, a Greenlandic anthropologist, analyzed the power structures and behaviors of his fellow citizens in relation to colonialism; he claims that too many Greenlanders adopted Danish mentality and power structures. Compounding this, Greenlanders are not used to speaking up; not for themselves, nor against any kind of power (Petersen 1995: 7). Through their colonial efforts, the Danish influenced Greenlanders into believing they were lucky; that they were the best colony in the world, free from violence. As a result, today a distinct majority of Greenlanders are fond of the Danish. Since they were granted home-rule in 1979, educated Greenlanders took on the role of the Danish colonizers. This led to an internal colonialism between the west and the east, and also between towns and settlements, replacing an external colonialism imposed by Denmark. The output of local media is just one representation of this. The few things reported from the east come mostly from the police and tend to focus on violence and crime. This fuels old ideas and presumptions, and results in East Greenland’s constant under- and misrepresentation and exclusion from cultural and political spheres both within and outside of Greenland.

## **PUBLIC SPHERE AND GEOGRAPHICAL BORDERS**

Media becomes an important factor regarding the creation of a community in a place where the world’s largest glacier, challenging arctic weather, and language differences create obstacles for Greenlanders to get together. The *mediascape*, borrowing from Appadurai’s (1990) term, is composed of various means of production and distribution of news—magazines, television, films, and advertisements—and creates a certain media landscape for the individual who consumes it. A consumer world view is heavily dependent on the *mediascape*, complicated by the fact that it is composed of both fiction (such as films) and non-fictional (like documentary news reports and social posts). The lines between what is real and what is not are blurred (ibid: 298). Unlike the “*imagined communities*” Benedict Anderson (1983) believed the media that is capable of creating, “an imagined world” becomes more likely when the audience’s imagination plays a significant role (Appadurai 1990: 298-299). For a large percentage of the Greenlandic population as a whole, the East Greenlandic culture is simultaneously exotic and traditional. This exoticism developed simply because, unlike most of Greenland, the East Greenlandic culture never lost its traditions. Through their situation of geographical

isolation, they also became culturally remote thereby unable to counter narrow perceptions of their culture from the “outside.” This limited view became the basis for an ill-informed imagined world of the place and its people. The interactive aspect of Web 2.0 invites the chance to change this view. News agents now depend to a larger extent on readers’ letters, offering platforms for blogs, readers’ images, and commenting systems to facilitate these. Readers add their point of view, interact with journalists and other readers and thus add another layer to the original news article. Readers are becoming producers, or “*producers*” according to Axel Burns (2008a). Online newspapers increasingly become a public sphere, which, according to Jürgen Habermas (1989), is created when citizens come together to debate current affairs. Public opinion is created through the exchange of ideas and information, debate, and the discovery of a common opinion; it is a journalist’s main purpose to foster these debates and exchanges. At times, commercial journalism may have eliminated some essential properties of the public sphere. Today interactivity and commenting systems are seen to be returning these properties to the table. Newspapers around the world are shifting toward more user-generated content (UGC) in response to decreased revenue and technological development. In a similar fashion, online newspapers are opening up to readers through commenting systems and links to social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. If used well, these spaces have the potential to form an online public sphere for discussion and debate, a place to criticize and be criticized, in order to reach a common consensus.

## THE GREENLANDIC MEDIASCAPES

### Newspapers

My main source for Greenland current affairs is *Sermitsiaq AG*, though there is rarely any news featured from where I live. *Sermitsiaq AG* is the major newspaper in Greenland and is based in Nuuk. It is comprised of three older newspapers, *Sermitsiaq*, *Atuagagdliutit* and *Grønlandsposten*. *Atuagagdliutit* is the oldest newspaper in Greenland, established by Danish geologist Hinrich Johannes Rink in 1861 in an attempt to reestablish Greenlandic identity after Danish colonization. Furthermore, Rink wanted to bring Greenlanders the main news from the “outside world” and for this reason, the paper was solely written in Greenlandic. Later, in 1952, *Atuagagdliutit* merged with the Danish language newspaper *Grønlandsposten* published since the Second World War. The new paper was called *AG*. *Sermitsiaq* had provided Greenlanders with news since 1958. Since 2010, *Sermitsiaq* and *Atuagagdliutit/Grønlandsposten* have worked under this common name. The two printed newspapers are still separate, while

their website merges the two. *Sermitsiaq* AG is published four times weekly, bilingually in Greenlandic and Danish. The content is descriptive news and event reports rather than investigative or analytical journalism; some material is simply press releases received from institutions, organizations and individuals around the country. The *Sermitsiaq* AG website is updated several times daily.

The relation between the online and printed newspaper is shaped by conditions in Greenland. The editorial board must take into consideration that the physical newspapers travel slowly, as flights are infrequent and weather dependent. In the East, for example, there is only one flight per week from Nuuk over the winter, two in the summer, weather permitting. The only newspaper I have ever seen there is the copy housed in the library. In such conditions, a printed newspaper quickly loses relevance. Internet opens up the newspaper's opportunity to achieve its reach potential. Online, each article has a link to related articles previously published in the newspaper. Through the website, readers are offered a domain for blogs, where everything from personal stories of everyday lives to theorizing about important political issues get equal space, and enrich the medium. The content is further enriched by the reader's opportunity to comment and share articles through their *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts. *Sermitsiaq* AG's commenting system is lively and provides a platform for personal opinions, debate or simply greetings to the person who the article is about. Those who comment are advised to follow a set of guidelines set by the editorial board. When readers comment via the website, the comments appear underneath the given article, and sometimes create a rich discussion—as in the news about Gedion and Justine's killing of the polar bear.

## Radio and Television

Every morning, my housekeeper connected his new smartphone to my portable speakers and turned on the radio, KNR, or Kalaallit Nunaata Radioa (Greenland's National Radio) being the only option. The program is mostly in Greenlandic, with the hourly news in Danish and an occasional inclusion of a Danish documentary program. News and weather is reported hourly throughout the day. There are church broadcasts, a children's program, talk and call-in programs—where East Greenlanders are frequent callers—and of course, there is music: Greenlandic choir music is a regular offering. Like radio, TV plays another large role in a Greenlandic household. The TV schedule is made up mostly of news and weather reports, children's TV and sporting events, sprinkled with a few documentary programs and talk and debate shows. Danish television from DR1, DR2 and DR3 are also available. The established technology leads radio and TV to be Greenlanders main source for news and information.



KNR is funded by self-rule government and has provided Greenlanders with radio and television broadcasting since the 1920s. The operation is bilingual—Greenlandic and Danish—but most of the material broadcast is in Greenlandic. KNR claims to have correspondents in each part of the country, and indeed there are several on the East Coast: one in Tasiilaq, one in Kulusuk, one in Isortoq and one in Illoqqortoormiut. These reporters, as well as other local reporters, report local news in their own languages and are given particular attention in the radio's morning program. Throughout the day, the most important news may be repeated in the national news and also on the website. KNR approximates that East Greenlanders do take part in interactive programs, such as call-in-shows, as much as other Greenlanders. To expand the interactive aspects of radio, KNR went online in 1996 and in 2012, introduced a live-stream “for the joy of all the Greenlanders that live outside of Greenland.” As a result of audience demand, they recently set up a *Twitter* account and a commenting system through *Facebook*. As on [www.sermitisiaq.ag](http://www.sermitisiaq.ag), there are common guidelines to do with commenting but comments are not edited. However, KNR's commenting system is not as commonly used as that of *Sermitisiaq AG*.

## Internet

TELE Greenland, the state-run telecommunication operator, has a monopoly-position on internet services. Private companies have made attempts at competition, but the high costs of maintaining physical infrastructure is quickly discouraging. In 2014, 66.7 percent of the nation had access to the internet compared to 98.2 percent in Iceland, and 86.2 percent in Germany. According to TELE Greenland's customer service department, Tasiilaq had something between 1,000–1,300 internet subscriptions. Smartphones and a 3G connection have provided more people with access to the internet, but smartphones are still a luxury. Although internet is particularly expensive in Greenland, and not accessible in most homes, there are alternatives. On the east coast, the school libraries offer computers and wireless internet two days a week for two hours. Unfortunately, this is only available to those who are 13 years and older. There is a small internet café in Tasiilaq, where an old computer opens up the world to those who need it.

These conditions limit the readers of the Greenlandic newspaper's online versions to those who can afford an internet connection and can read Greenlandic and/or Danish. This also determines who can take part in the debate offered by the online platform.

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## A COMMENT ON EAST GREENLAND

In a scattered and geographically divided country like Greenland, conditions prevent a physical public sphere in the Habermasian sense, and public opinion is therefore almost impossible to realize in real life. The internet opens up a previously unknown possibility. The article about Gedion and Justine's killing of the polar bear offers evidence that this online platform has potential to join the split nation in an accessible public place that Habermas (1989) believes is essential for a common opinion.

Using the online public space found within the commenting system is fairly simple for anyone familiar with reading the news online. The simplest and most used option is to "like" the articles; that is, to actively press the "like" button by the article on the medium's website—for example those found on *Facebook*, or *Twitter* sites. Additionally, readers can share articles on their Walls, re-tweet from *Twitter*, or simply comment directly below the given article on the media's *Facebook* account, and also on their own Wall. There is a good balance between Greenlandic and Danish comments, but very few, if any, East Greenlandic comments. Unfortunately, my language abilities confined my observations to the Danish comments. Following a global tendency, most comments are short: anything from a word to a few lines. Sharing an article is more common among my *Facebook* contacts because the comments are not published on the official website, and therefore not bound by the commenting guidelines. Regardless, comments remain mostly civilized. In the cases where comments come below the article, they become a part of the article in a way. This can take the form of individual comments such as greetings, or reader's opinion, a critique on what is said—possibly a trigger for further debate. For the purpose of my research, this was the most important aspect because it is here that the shared official space is created.

My impression was that readers felt that East Greenland is too often forgotten, which leads to invisibility on a national level. When I consulted media officials they claimed that, per capita, they paid East Greenland as much attention as other parts of the country. Whatever the percentage may be, the area's unfair representation was another repeated point made among readers. They felt the few reports from the east centered on the people's barbaric nature, alcoholism, and other related social problems; such as violence or child-neglect. "Perhaps there are not so many newsworthy events in a small hunting community, but that does not mean the area should go unnoticed," says Massanti Riel. Riel, who works for Destination East Greenland, the official tourist bureau, is concerned with the area's reputation and manages the organization's social media accounts. Regarding news coverage, he comments:

It isn't so much what is missing, it's about what should NOT be there. Although those things do happen, there is no reason to feed the disputes that already exist between the east and the west. And when there finally is something [neutral or positive], there is someone that turns it around and makes it negative. (Interview with the author, March 2014).

Massanti refers specifically to the polar bear incident in Kulusuk and subsequent comments. Rather than being privy to the actual statistics regarding the percentage of the media's coverage in East Greenland, I focused on perceptions and difference of opinion between those in East Greenland and the media organizations. Based on my research, I divide reasons for commenting on East Greenland into a list of six categories:

- A reminder that East Greenland should be considered in nationwide discussions
- Gratitude for the rare attention
- Regret that news is predominantly negative
- East Greenlanders disagreement over specific news reports from the area
- Outsiders pointing out East Greenlander's barbaric behavior
- Justification for reported behavior

### Image 3



An article from *Sermitsiaq* AG shared on a reader's timeline on *Facebook*. Comment: "Accessibility to good food products are very different between the east and the west, the prices aren't just different, they are CRAZY different. The normal health conditions will be impaired because of simple foods and more intake of western foods. More diseases, more instances of tuberculosis could be a consequence. I would think someone would want to do something about this?????" Heading: More poverty in East Greenland: As something new in the population's research, we have asked the question if there is food shortage in the house. The answers are different between East and West Greenland. <http://sermitsiaq.ag/node/182695> Accessed: March 5, 2016. (My translation)

What I noticed is that most of the comments on the media's website are from Danish-born East Greenlanders or Danes who live, or have lived, in the area. These are individuals who, like me, have gotten to know the culture, respect it and have subsequently formed a strong bond with it. East Greenlanders do not speak out to the same extent, and I believe the reasons are deep-rooted and complicated.

On the most basic level, they are still in the process of keeping up with modern ideologies and technology. As I mentioned earlier, it has only been about 130 years since they first came into contact with the "outside world," and the adjustment is understandably gradual. Related to this fact, there is a certain class divide in the East between the locals and the Danish. Because of their higher level of education and their familiarity with "modern", "western" ways of working, Danes occupy many of the well-paid jobs in the area while many natives are unemployed or work in low-paid jobs. This means that Danes, more than locals, are more likely to have access to a computer and regularly use the internet. Yet the full truth is not so simple.

I believe that limited participation from the locals relates largely to the online language. In other words, Danish and Greenlandic language is of utmost importance when it comes to the Greenlandic media, and not all Greenlanders share a native tongue. All schoolbooks are written in Greenlandic and Danish; none are in East Greenlandic. From an early age, children study in their second and third language. This has its benefits, but it mostly results in a high number of students who struggle throughout their entire school life, many of whom drop out (Lyngø 2015). Erna, who has worked closely with the East Greenlandic youth as a social worker, sees this as a severe discrimination against the inhabitants of the country. If West Greenlandic children are struggling with further education because Danish is their first language, one can only imagine how difficult it must be for their counterparts in the east. The question of language also leads to the fact that written language is a relatively new phenomenon for East Greenlanders. This is a deep-rooted challenge for media to overcome. Only when the first foreigners came to the area in 1885 were East Greenlanders introduced to the idea of written language in the form of the Bible. Writing came even later. Aanaa Kirsten, a Danish sociologist who also worked in Tasiilaq for many years, believes that this historic fact could be a reason that local people do not comment on the news. Writing is still not a part of everyday life. She expressed a difficulty in getting her East Greenlandic colleagues to write meeting notes when working in Tasiilaq. She realized this problem was not limited to work meetings, but that they were not used to writing in general. Still today, there are no official East Greenlandic spelling rules; the spelling of a word is based on phonetics and therefore different depending on who writes. Surprisingly, this applies to even the most educated. The headmaster at the school where I worked was shy to reply to my e-mails for

a long time because her Danish was not good enough. I only got a reply when I returned to Greenland again, months later, and she told me in person what she would have written. Within these linguistic challenges, there exists the risk that, because an individual's Greenlandic or Danish language skills are insufficient, one would rather not write to avoid embarrassment. This may also explain why East Greenlanders prefer radio.

With the rise of social media, East Greenlanders are starting to write more, even in their own language. This is an important development that could lead to increased participation in online and offline debates. Massanti believes that, "to be able to correct misrepresentation, East Greenlanders must learn to document positive events, not just with short updates via *Instagram*, *Facebook* and *Twitter*, but also just to send good news to *Sermitsiaq* that they can publish." To date, there have been several journalism courses, none of which have had lasting effect. Until East Greenlanders have regular access to the internet and the confidence to engage in online media in meaningful ways, they cannot speak-up for themselves and take part in a nationwide debate about matters related to their area. I believe that depending on others to stand up for them maintains some of the post-colonial circumstances.

## **CONCLUSION: AN ONLINE PLATFORM AS PUBLIC SPACE**

Debating different opinions is a fruitful path to knowledge and should be encouraged. According to Habermas (1996), the exchange of views and knowledge, as well as criticism are essential characteristics of the public sphere (Blanning 1998: 27). The news about the polar bear incident, a simple and neutral report, turned out to be a very sensitive political issue. The comments section allowed a greater story to be told, far beyond one man shooting a polar bear. It shed light on people's pride in a way of life that others consider barbaric. In line with what Robert Petersen suggested, it made clear that a considerable number of Greenlanders are drifting away from their hunting heritage and instead adopting the mentality of the colonizer, but in a global context, rather than directed towards the Danes. The commenting system on the *Sermitsiaq* AG became a public sphere to discuss a major cultural matter. Although no common opinion was reached, nor a conclusion as such, the comments brought together different views and stirred debate that otherwise would not have taken place.

For a scattered nation like Greenland, the online commenting system has enabled dialogue and an exchange of viewpoints. By opening up for participation from their readers, they are increasing the chance that each point of view will be raised, and a common opinion can be reached. Readers can harness the power of the media to create an imagined world and a represented identity that is fair. This option brings East Greenlanders great potential to compensate a deep

rooted under- and misrepresentation, yet it seems that they have handed the responsibility over to those more familiar with modern technology and western ideologies. Through news publication, *Sermitsiaq* AG originally set out to create a common identity as Greenlanders, set apart from Danes. The Greenlandic language was instrumental in the effort. However, they now have a new challenge: to unite Greenlanders across language barriers, isolated locations and differing levels of familiarity with “modern” and globalized mindsets.

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