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## THE ROLE OF THE SÁMI MEDIA IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

### The Arctic Railway in Yle Sápmi and NRK Sápmi

*Inker-Anni Sara, Torkel Rasmussen and Roy Krøvel*

#### Introduction

This media research was prompted by the Arctic Railway construction project that is planned to run from the city of Roavvenjárga/Rovaniemi in Finland to the city of Kirkonjárga/Kirkenes by the Arctic Ocean in Northern Norway crossing the Sámi homeland, Sápmi. The railway would be part of a larger transport connection linking northern areas directly to the Northwest Passage, also known as the new Silk Road. It may also open a new Central European rail link through the Rail Baltica project and the related Helsinki-Tallinn tunnel. In Finland, the railway would run through the Sámi homeland area and split 6 of 13 Sámi reindeer-herding cooperatives. In Norway, the planned Arctic Railway would increase the importance of the port of Kirkonjárga/Kirkenes but would run through one reindeer-herding district and affect another.

The Arctic Railway is the largest project ever planned in the Sámi homeland of Finland, with a budget of three billion euros. It would connect the Arctic Region and its natural resources directly to the Central European economic and political markets as well as to Asian and Chinese metropolitan areas.

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Sápmi, the Sámi homeland, and Sámi communities are located in one of the most resource-rich areas of the world, in a region where the world superpowers struggle for global commercial exploitation and power. Global warming has turned attention to resources and routes that it has not been previously possible to exploit – for example, the Northwest Passage. Meanwhile, the fragility of nature in the Arctic, the human rights of Indigenous Peoples and the rights of the Sámi to their own culture and way of life are at stake.

The purpose of the chapter is to examine the role of the Sámi media in serving democracy in Sámi society in Finland and Norway. We do that by investigating Yle Sápmi's and NRK Sápmi's news coverage of the Arctic Railway project from 2013 to 2020. Yle Sápmi and NRK Sápmi are both Sámi units of the national broadcasting companies Norsk rikskringkasting (NRK) and Yleisradio (Yle). These are the most important media for the Sámi in Norway and Finland, but they are not autonomous Indigenous media. (For more about the Sámi media system, see also Rasmussen *et al.* in this volume.)

On a more general level, this chapter discusses the significance of public debate in Sámi society and the role of the Sámi media in facilitating the democratic participation of the Sámi people. The role of the news media in general is to inform citizens about the decision-making processes and actions of various political actors in representative democracies and to give voice to diverse groups and opinions in society. It is very difficult to imagine a modern world without mass media information and ongoing public debate. Those who dominate public debate often also dominate decision making, and those whose voices are not heard in public debate are also often absent from decision making. Therefore, in addition to its role in providing news content in the Sámi language, the role of the Sámi media is important in informing mainstream society about issues important to the Sámi and in bringing diverse Sámi voices into public debate. Furthermore, the Sámi media plays an important role in the Indigenous Sámi society by informing them, acting as a watchdog, setting the agenda for public debate and providing an arena for a multiplicity of Indigenous voices ([Sara 2007](#)). The media is capable of reframing discourses presented in other arenas and transferring salience from the media agenda to public and policy agendas that may extend its effects to other sectors in society ([Hesmondhalgh 2019](#), 102). When the media selects certain issues and people to be included in media coverage, some topics and persons become more prominent than others ([Althaus and Tewksbury 2002](#), 180). We investigate how these democratic functions can be identified in the online news coverage of Yle Sápmi and NRK Sápmi.

The news coverage of YLE Sápmi and NRK Sápmi<sup>1</sup> are investigated as an issue arena in which multiple stakeholders with opposing interests compete for whose voice will be heard in the media ([Vos et al. 2014](#)). By emphasizing different aspects, the various involved stakeholders aim to dominate the debate. In the case of the Arctic Railway, the stakeholders are those who are

affected by the railway plan or who can affect the plan (following [Freeman 2010](#)). The news coverage of Yle Sápmi and NRK Sápmi on the Arctic Railway plan is analyzed by applying six types of framing of social issues<sup>2</sup> (see [Meriläinen and Vos 2013](#); [Hallahan 1999](#)). The research is guided by the following questions: Which actors were included in the public debate concerning the planning of the Arctic Railway, and how often were they selected as interviewees? Which types of framing of social issues (see [Meriläinen and Vos 2013](#); [Hallahan 1999](#)) were used in the public debate on the Arctic Railway plan by the pro- and contra-railway stakeholders? What do these news stories tell about the role of Yle Sápmi and NRK Sápmi as Sámi news media in informing, commending, acting as a watchdog, setting an agenda for the Sámi society and providing a forum for various voices? The study seeks to shed light on the existing power relations and competing land-use interests that the Sámi and other Indigenous Peoples face on daily basis.

### **The power of the media**

In the process of constructing nation-states, the media has played a key role worldwide in creating an image of one national language and identity and a shared understanding of the common economic and political interests of the nation-states ([Anderson 2006](#)). Both Finland and Norway, as Nordic social democratic welfare states, have built well-resourced national public-service broadcasters. Public broadcasting companies under which the Sámi units also broadcast (for example, Sámi news via television, radio and internet) have dominated the media field in both countries.

The power of media is undeniable in today's mediated policy making ([Herkman 2009](#)), in which those who dominate public debate often also dominate policy making, while those who are excluded from public debate are often also excluded from decision making ([Hanitzsch and Vos 2017](#), 120). Also, on Indigenous issues, the media has the power to guide public opinion and to select which issues become prominent by placing certain topics on the news agenda ([Ragas and Kiouisis 2010](#), 563). For instance, in Canada, news practices of the mainstream media have often been found to concentrate on sensations ([Hafsteinsson 2010](#)) that place Indigenous Peoples in stereotypical contexts – for example, news about casinos and child custody in Indigenous communities ([Trudeau and Ahtone 2017](#), 46–47). In Finland, the Sámi have been cast as, for example, passive objects of other actors' activities ([Pietikäinen 2000](#)). Similarly, in Australia, stories presenting the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as historical leftovers incapable of modern development have become prominent. Consequently, sensationalist news about Indigenous Peoples seems to be considered 'important' and has become a salient feature of Indigenous Peoples in society at large ([Molnar 2001](#), 321–325). In contrast, news stories that prioritize the relevance of Indigenous livelihoods, languages and ways of life that could better serve

Indigenous Peoples in democracies are often excluded from the mainstream media's agenda ([Hafsteinsson 2010](#)).

Indigenous movements that often lack a state apparatus have sought access to their own media to raise wider social awareness of matters important to them ([Pietikäinen 2008](#), 173–174). For instance, the Zapatistas used the internet in the early 1990s to gain global support for their concerns ([Castells 2002](#), 53). The Zapatistas have established an autonomous Indigenous media independent of the state, financed by themselves and their supporters. There are important differences between the struggles of Indigenous Peoples in Mexico and in Sápmi. Indigenous Peoples in Mexico have been constantly subjected to threats and violence at a scale that has not been experienced in Sápmi for at least 100 years.

[Hanusch \(2014, 5\)](#), however, describes the current situation as a 'renaissance' of Indigenous communities, whose activists organized themselves in the form of media to bring about political change. The Sámi media has to some extent united the Sámi people in four different states – Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden – and created an understanding of the existence of a unified Sámi people (see also Rasmussen *et al.* in this volume). In the 1960s, many Sámi villages were not yet affected by mainstream society, but today, Sámi TV news informs all Sámi about Indigenous news topics across the wide Sámi. Likewise, the positive media publicity in the mainstream media for the Sámi political movement in Finland at the end of the 1960s was significant in promoting Sámi affairs such as the establishment of the 2nd Sámi Committee and the first test elections of the Sámi Parliament (before the Sámi delegation), followed by the establishment of the Sámi Parliament of Finland ([Sara 2020](#))<sup>3</sup> (see also Mörkenstam *et al.* in this volume). Similarly, in Norway, cultural expressions manifested in media and television, such as Sámi participation in the Eurovision Song Contest and television series for children, have contributed to the growing awareness of Indigenous Peoples, culture and rights.

## **Indigenous news media and democracy**

It is often taken for granted that democracy is served by the news media within a certain nation-state and its publics ([Ward 2005](#), 3) that continue to be viewed through the lens and values of Western journalism, excluding non-Western political systems and their media development ([Hanitzsch and Vos 2018](#), 159). Globalization of the media is expected to result in journalists acting as 'global agents' and 'serving world citizens' ([Ward 2005](#), 6) as the media fulfils its role as a distributor of reliable information ([Konieczna and Powers 2016](#), 14). This idea appears to fit the starting point of Indigenous news media. The multiple modernities perspective provides a context for the analysis of postcolonial societies for which both Western models and native cultural elements are combined to investigate the modernization process; for example, the media is

studied as a combination of Western journalistic practices and values of non-Western cultures ([de Albuquerque 2018](#), 12–13). Similarly, the Sámi news media combines Western news values with Indigenous Sámi perspectives ([Sara 2007](#)). Likewise, when Indigenous news media uncover issues that affect Indigenous communities, it enables marginalized Indigenous groups to participate in public debate ([Dahal and Aram 2013](#), 18–22).

We agree with [Markelin \(2017, 15\)](#) that Sámi media and Indigenous media worldwide are necessary for democratic processes in Indigenous societies because the agenda of mainstream media lacks diversity, equality and salience related to Indigenous issues. The missing media representations indicate ‘a failure of democratic representation and participation,’ such as the lack of reporting on Aboriginal deaths in custody, where an Indigenous group had no voice in the mainstream media ([Bacon 2005](#), 20). Likewise, Indigenous communities are often underserved by the mainstream media ([Trudeau and Ahtone 2017](#)). Therefore, free native news media are important in producing independent information for the positive development of Indigenous communities and their opportunities to participate in decision making affecting them ([Rave 2018](#), 11). In other words, when citizens are well informed by the news media, it can lead to increased participation and a better functioning democracy, whereas political activity and opportunities for democratic development may diminish in poorly informed communities ([Gans 1998](#), 6).

Indigenous news media are inclined to inform the public of what their democratically elected representatives decide for them ([Meadows 2009](#)). Indigenous media presents ‘our stories, our voices and our perspectives,’ giving a voice to those Indigenous individuals affected by the decisions of their Indigenous representative bodies ([Hafsteinnsson 2010](#), 56). Presenting ‘our stories, our voices and our perspectives’ requires a diversity of voices, but even the Sámi media tend to assume that the Sámi have ‘shared stakes,’ or the same interests. Yle Sápmi and NRK Sápmi inform the Finnish and Norwegian mainstream societies by giving voice to a multiplicity of Sámi stakeholders. In doing so, they also foster democracy in the mainstream societies. The Indigenous political journalism produced by the free and independent Sámi media is intended to provide an arena for interaction between Sámi audiences and Sámi decision makers and thus offer opportunities for the promotion of democratic processes ([Skogerbø et al. 2018](#), 4) by participating in informed public debate ([Rave 2018](#)). Furthermore, Indigenous media has embraced new media technologies in often-distant Indigenous communities to promote the informed participation of Indigenous individuals ([Meadows 2009](#), 515) and the inclusion of Indigenous sources instead of frequently used elite sources ([Bacon 2005](#), 37). Some Indigenous media scholars have discussed the relationship between media, democracy and the self-determination of Indigenous Peoples. For example, [Plaut \(2015\)](#) argues that the role of the Sámi media in consultative democracies appears to

be the provision of independent information as a basis for informed discussion on their self-determination.

## **The Arctic Railway project**

In August 2013, the Finnish government announced Finland's Arctic strategy, which included the Arctic Railway plan. In 2014, former prime minister of Finland, Paavo Lipponen, was appointed by the Confederation of Finnish Industries to prepare a report on various track options. The track options were: 1) from Roavvenjárga/Rovaniemi, Finland, to Kirkonjárga/Kirkenes, Norway; 2) from Kemi, Finland, via Giron/Kiruna, Sweden, to Áhkkánjárga/Narvik, Norway; 3) from Kolari, Finland, to Romsa/Tromsø, Norway; and 4) from Kemijärvi, Finland, to Murmansk, Russia.

The discussion began to take shape over the next few years. In 2015, the prime minister of Finland, Alexander Stubb, did not promote the decision to implement the railway project. However, in January 2015, the prime ministers of Finland, Sweden and Norway discussed the business opportunities involved and the importance of Nordic cooperation and global social responsibilities related to the Arctic Railway. In 2016, the former prime minister of Finland, Juha Sipilä, stated that the construction of the Arctic Railway would be Finland's number one priority during Finland's Arctic Council presidency in 2017. In 2017, the Regional Council of Lapland initiated the Lapland Provincial Planning Process, focusing on the Arctic Railway plan. In the same year, the Ministry of Transport and Communications of Finland, in collaboration with Norway, ordered an investigation of the railway project.

It was not until January 2018 that the Ministry of Transport and Communications negotiated with the Sámi Parliament of Finland on the railway plan for the first time. In March 2018, the track option from Roavvenjárga/Rovaniemi to Kirkonjárga/Kirkenes was selected by the Ministry of Transport and Communications for further investigation. However, an assessment of the impact on Sámi culture and environment was not carried out at the time. Through its international obligations, Finland has committed to respect the rights of the Sámi as an Indigenous People and, for example, to consult the Sámi Parliament regarding all measures that may affect the status of the Sámi as an Indigenous People ([Heinämäki 2017](#)). In January 2019, the Finnish-Norwegian working group concluded in a report that the railway project would not be profitable. Nevertheless, in 2019, a well-known Finnish businessman entered into an agreement with Norwegian partners to carry out further studies on the implementation of the railway project.

## **The news coverage of the Arctic Railway in Yle Sápmi and NRK Sápmi**

Here, we will analyze the news coverage of the Arctic Railway in more detail and show which actors were present in the news stories and how they framed the railway project. For the analysis, we have divided actors involved in the public debate into two groups: Those supporting the railway construction (pro-railway stakeholders) and those against the railway plan (contra-railway stakeholders). Stakeholders are those who are affected by or can affect the achievement of the organization's objectives ([Freeman 2010](#)).

### *The public debate on the Arctic Railway begins*

NRK Sápmi published its first news article about the Arctic Railway in 2010, but the next article on the topic was not published until 2013, when Yle Sápmi published its first article. In the time frame from 2013 to 2016, there were 12 news stories available for analysis. In almost every news story, Finland's leading politicians succeeded in making their voices heard, including members of the Finnish Parliament; ministers including the prime ministers of Finland, Norway and Sweden; and other power stakeholders representing, for example, the business sector in Finnish Lapland. The main voices discussing business opportunities and promoting the interests of mainstream society such as transport, mining, tourism etc. were prominent. Only three news stories, by the president of the Sámi Parliament of Finland, the chairman of the Reindeer Herding Association of Norway, and a writer from Lapland pointed out the possibly adverse effects of the Arctic Railway plan.

In contrast to Yle Sápmi, NRK Sápmi published only three news stories on the subject from 2013 through 2016. They gave voice both to prominent elite sources, such as the Finnish prime minister and the mayor of Máttá-Várjjat/Sør-Varanger. Previous elite research has shown that the mainstream media favours elites as sources, i.e. actors with political, social or economic power. Nevertheless, NRK Sápmi also highlighted the problems the railway would cause to reindeer-herding livelihoods, and the leader of the Reindeer Herding Association of Norway was quoted as saying that the planned railway project may be a 'bloody story' and a catastrophe for reindeer herders. The reason that the story made it to the news may have been geographical closeness to sources as one option was to build the railway through Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino, one of the largest reindeer-grazing districts in Norway: NRK Sápmi has a local office in this municipality, and the planned railway would have been constructed close to NRK Sápmi's main office in Kárášjohka/Karasjok.

In this period, the pro-railway stakeholders, representing mainly businesses and politics in Finland, focused on economic aspects, especially the utilization of natural resources and business opportunities in the Arctic. All pro-railway stakeholders stated that the three-billion-euro Arctic Railway project was a large-scale project with impacts on the environment, the state economy and the Sámi culture that need to be assessed well in advance. However, some pros

claimed that the time was not right for the railway and that the existing harbours fulfil the current transportation needs of the mining industry. Other pros argued that there was an urgent need for the railway project in promoting the mining industry and in transporting of northern products to the world market.

From 2013 through 2016, the contra-railway stakeholders focused on the severe consequences of the railway for the Sámi culture and the environment of Lapland and the impacts of industrial development followed by it. The chairman of the Reindeer Herding Association of Norway pointed out that the Arctic Railway would kill hundreds of reindeer in Norway. In 2016, the president of the Sámi Parliament of Finland stated that the planned Arctic Railway was the real reason the extended participation rights of the Sámi in the reform of the Act on Metsähallitus,<sup>4</sup> the most important land use law in Finland, were not implemented. The president of the Sámi Parliament also expressed her concerns about the increased international interest in the Arctic region and the exploitation of natural resources expected to follow the railroad project.

### ***The planning of the Arctic Railway continues in the Ministry of Transport and Communications***

In 2017, five news stories were produced by Yle Sápmi on the Arctic Railway project. The news coverage was based on interviews with the Minister of Transport and Communications of Finland, public servants of the ministry and the president of the Sámi Parliament of Finland. Notably, the news coverage did not contain other Sámi and local stakeholders, and the president of the Sámi Parliament was the only Sámi voice participating in the agenda of Yle Sápmi in 2017, whereas voices supporting the project and linking the project to the importance of utilizing the resources of the Arctic Region for the national economy were prominent.

At the time, however, Yle Sápmi to some extent took on the role of an information provider and watchdog of the regional authority and the Ministry in charge. Meanwhile, some Sámi actors – for example, the Sámi Youth Organization of Finland – managed to push these issues on Yle Sápmi's agenda by publicly discussing the lack of impact assessment for the Arctic Railway project and the lack of consultations with the Sámi Parliament. It was also emphasized that the Ministries concerned had not consulted with the Sámi Parliaments of Finland and Norway. At the time, the Ministry of Transport and Communications of Finland noted that the Ministry did not know yet whether it was going to negotiate with the Sámi Parliament at the early stages. However, at the end of 2017, the Ministry announced that it would negotiate with the Sámi Parliament in January 2018. Yle Sápmi, acting as a watchdog towards the ministry in charge, may have led to public pressure to initiate consultation with the Sámi.



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Cases from NRK Troms and Finnmark<sup>5</sup> in 2017 and 2018 only included elite sources such as the Finnish and Norwegian ministers of transport and did not address any consequences for the environment, Sámi livelihoods, cultural practices or reindeer husbandry. It is interesting to note that NRK Sápmi addressed such issues only once, early in this period. When the destination for the railway was set for Kirkonjárga/Kirkenes, NRK Sápmi did not convey anything about possible problems for reindeer husbandry in that area or the effect on the local Sámi land use and cultural practices. NRK Troms and Finnmark can be interpreted as an arena for leading Norwegian and Finnish bureaucrats and politicians up to the ministerial level and a few local leaders to express hope and joy towards the utilization of northern resources.

During this period, the pro-railway stakeholders in Finland emphasized the growing importance of the Arctic and of the railway project in speeding up development, employment and utilization of the Arctic resources. They addressed the economic importance of a Central European transport connection to the Arctic region. At this stage, the pro-railway stakeholders in Norway also focused on economic aspects. They saw great opportunities for growth and economic development. The elite sources often mentioned exploitation of natural resources as a positive outcome of this railway project and saw a new railway connection as a logistical improvement that would ensure the flow of people and goods. These elite sources often underlined that the Arctic area was becoming more important both in the Nordic region and in the EU. They saw that a railway from the Arctic Ocean to the south would help make transport easier and provide more jobs. In this context, climate change was mentioned as something inevitable that would create new opportunities for businesses.

At the same time, the contra-railway stakeholders required that the Sámi Parliament of Finland be included in the planning process in such a way that the Sámi would have their voices heard and their views taken into account in negotiations. The Ministry of Transport and Communications of Finland has been accused of not having been in contact with the Sámi Parliament so far.

### *An intensified period of planning and resistance in 2018–2020*

In 2018, Yle Sápmi greatly intensified its news production on the case of the Arctic Railway. Simultaneously, discussions and activities were increased and intensified in Sámi society, such as extensive Red Line protests organized by Greenpeace, the Suohpanterror Sámi art group and the Sámi Youth Organization of Finland, together with the Sámi Parliament of Finland and some affected Sámi reindeer-herding communities. These actors proved themselves able to influence Yle Sápmi's news coverage and to set an agenda for it when opposing the railway project. The number of news stories and the diversity of voices included in the news coverage on the railway plan increased. This new interest in the railway case followed the increased

activities of both developers and those opposing the railway construction. A total of 32 news stories about the planned Arctic Railway construction were produced and included various civil society actors. The most significant topic was the Ministry of Transport and Communications of Finland announcing the selected railway route. The Ministry finally opened negotiations with the Sámi Parliament, and the Regional Council of Lapland organized public hearings concerning Lapland's regional land-use plan in Sámi villages.

At the same time, the Arctic Railway disappeared from NRK Sápmi's news production and only appeared in short news items produced by NRK Troms and Finnmark and in news stories produced by Yle Sápmi. It seems that NRK Sápmi outsourced the coverage of the Arctic Railway to Yle Sápmi and NRK Troms and Finnmark. This lack of interest coincided with Kirkonjårga/Kirkenes being chosen as the railway's terminus.

As in previous years, the minister of transport and communications of Finland, the officials of the Ministry, the officials of the Regional Council of Lapland and the president of the Sámi Parliament of Finland were the dominant voices in the news coverage. However, a multiplicity of other stakeholder groups and individual citizens now entered Yle Sápmi's agenda. Stakeholder mapping shows that the stakeholders involved were politicians of Sámi municipalities, the vice chairman of the Sámi Parliament of Finland and other members of the Sámi Parliament of Finland, the Saami Council, the Regional Council of Lapland, representatives of Sámi youth organizations from Finland and Norway, Lapland members of the Finnish Parliament, regional authorities, the chair of the Skolt Sámi Village Administration,<sup>6</sup> the chairs and other representatives of the Reindeer Herding Cooperatives, a Greenpeace expert, a human rights expert on international law, young Sámi reindeer herders, Sámi musicians and other active citizens.

By 2018, Yle Sápmi appeared to be more than before an arena for public debate where Sámi and other local stakeholders could discuss the project. New voices were beginning to be heard. However, these voices had something in common: Most were already well known from other public debates. Yle Sápmi had the role of a watchdog of government and authorities, especially in relation to the concerns of the reindeer herders. In 2018, Yle Sápmi informed the Sámi and set the agenda for Sámi society. Yet it remains unclear to what extent other Sámi stakeholders influenced the agenda of the news coverage on the Arctic Railway by pushing their issues onto YLE Sápmi's agenda. However, many other Sámi politicians and other representatives of Sámi industries such as fishing and tourism did not have an opportunity to participate in the discussion. In the end, some topics 'implementing indigenous news practices of deep democracy,' prioritizing the relevance of all Indigenous livelihoods and ways of life ([Hafsteinnsson 2010](#)), ended up missing to various extents.

In 2018, some pro-railway stakeholders stated that the railway project would benefit the future of Finland and Lapland by making fish, forest and

mining resources more accessible and enabling the transport of goods and tourists to the Arctic areas while emphasizing that the railway should harm the environment and Sámi reindeer herding as little as possible.

At the time, the framing by the contra-railway stakeholders focused instead on responsibilities, unbalanced power relations and consequences. Blame was attributed to the Ministry of Transport and Communications of Finland for excluding the Sámi Parliament of Finland from the evaluation of alternative tracks and the selection of the final track. Some who were contra referred to the colonial history of the Sámi and the related destruction of the Sámi language, religion and industries, insisting that industrial development and making the utilization of forests and ore deposits more accessible needed to stop. Some Sámi herders argued that they did not have a real opportunity to influence the planning and to say no to it. The vulnerable position of the Inari Sámi and Skolt Sámi minorities and their industries and the loss of land they have experienced are underlined by contra stakeholders (about the situation of Inari and Skolt Sámi languages, see Pasanen in this volume). The Skolt Sámi had to leave their traditional territories in Russia during the Second World War (see Magnani; and Jousté in this volume). The more recent history of the southern parts of the Sámi homeland is in many respects similar, as extensive reindeer pastures disappeared under water reservoirs constructed for hydroelectric power. Some contras have emphasized the severe consequences of railway construction on pastureland, the loss of land, contamination and the number of reindeer being killed by train accidents. Others have called for respect for the rights of Indigenous Peoples and for early consultation with the Sámi.

### ***Developers continue to plan the Arctic Railway project in 2019–2020***

In the period from 2019 to 2020, the news production of Yle Sápmi on the railway construction consisted of nine news stories produced in 2019 and three in 2020. The key event during this time was the publication of the Finnish-Norwegian final planning report in 2019 concluding that the railway project was unprofitable. Most of the news stories related to this were based on official sources such as the minister and officials from the Ministry of Transport and Communications of Finland.

Lapland's regional land-use plan and related hearings were initiated by the Regional Council of Lapland. This led Yle Sápmi to interview officials of the Regional Council of Lapland, some municipal politicians of the Ohcejohka/Utsjoki municipality, individual citizens, the Skolt Sámi Village Administration, the board member of the Sámi Parliament and chairs of the youth organizations of Finnish political parties. A heated debate followed when the Council of Lapland decided to continue the planning of the railway in relation to Lapland's regional land-use plan. The debate continued on

Twitter and Yle Sápmi when a well-known businessman began to lead the railway project, exploring the possibilities for its implementation. The dominant voices in 2019 were the Sámi activists resisting the project and the developers promoting it. The digital media agenda setting was evident when Sámi activists' claim that this businessman gave a face to the destruction of the Sámi culture was transferred from Twitter to Yle Sápmi's agenda.

In 2019, the pro stakeholders in Finland stated that there was a need to speed up the trade route between Asia and Europe as the railway would shorten the transport of Chinese products to Europe by 20 days. Some contras claimed that no matter how the Sámi resisted the railway and how unprofitable the plan was, it continued to be in Lapland's regional land-use plan. Some contras, young Finnish politicians, stated that the railway plan needed to be stopped for reasons related to climate change and Indigenous Peoples' rights. All in all, the contra railway stakeholders highlighted aspects related to the severe consequences of the railway for the Sámi culture and for the environment. The contras stated that the Sámi had no real influence on the project planning and that the industrial development of Sámi territories must be stopped.

## Conclusions

All in all, from 2013 to 2016, some indications of both NRK Sápmi's and Yle Sápmi's role as 'watchdog' and provider of reliable information can be seen. This study shows that Yle Sápmi to some extent informed its audiences on the Arctic Railway plan and had an ambition to act as a watchdog of the various powerful actors involved, such as politicians, businesses and regional authorities in Northern Finland. Yle Sápmi had a clear intention to inform the Sámi, in the Sámi language and from Sámi perspectives, on what their democratically elected Finnish MPs were thinking about the Arctic Railway project. Moreover, Yle Sápmi focused on relevant issue aspects for the Sámi, such as bringing the railway project, among other Finland Arctic strategy projects, into the spotlight of public debate. However, the results question whether Yle Sápmi sets the agenda or instead follows the agenda set by leading politicians. Yle Sápmi was not very watchdog-like early on but later posed some important critical questions by including alternative voices. Those issues that enter the media agenda are regarded as 'more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to the audience' ([Entman 1993](#), 53). From 2013 to 2016, almost all news stories on the issue were relatively short, comprising only one interview each. Although they formed a kind of discussion, they remained individual texts not linked to larger land-use debates in Northern Finland, such as ILO Convention no. 169.<sup>7</sup> From 2013 to 2017, Yle Sápmi's news coverage did not provide an arena for a wider public debate, including a multiplicity of Sámi actors. A deeper analysis of what the construction of a railway would mean for the Sámi people was missing.

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It was not until 2018 that YLE Sápmi's news coverage of the Arctic Railway was more comprehensive; more Sámi voices were included in the debate, and a clear Sámi agenda was visible. Although in 2018, a wide range of actors entered the media agenda, most of them were well-known public figures in Sámi and mainstream society. NRK Sápmi produced very few news stories on the Arctic Railway. For a short period of time, NRK Sápmi showed interest in the consequences for reindeer husbandry in Norway, but this attention ceased when the terminus was set for Kirkonjárga/Kirkenes and thus would no longer affect the important Sámi town of Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino. The reason for the inadequate news coverage may be that the change of terminal meant that the railway would have impacted fewer Sámi and have less impact on reindeer herding in Norway than in Finland. It disappeared from NRK Sápmi's agenda regardless of the fact that the railway would still have affected important Sámi interests. Yet NRK Sápmi has published a number of Yle Sápmi's, NRK Troms's and NRK Finnmark's stories. One could argue that NRK Sápmi partly 'outsourced' the journalistic coverage of the Arctic Railway to their colleagues in Yle Sápmi, NRK Troms and NRK Finnmark. Stories published by NRK Troms and NRK Finnmark were dominated by elite sources, which highlighted the economic benefits of a railroad.

Like YLE Sápmi, NRK Sápmi to some extent had a watchdog function, but their coverage of the issue was haphazard and incomplete, and no conclusions can be drawn. It may be a question for further research why NRK Sápmi lost interest in a project described as a catastrophe for an important Sámi livelihood in 2014 and 2016. However, based on previous research on Sámi news media ([Sara 2007](#)), we would have expected that the news coverage of NRK Sápmi would have been more comprehensive. Sámi media would normally want to cover issues affecting relatively few people if the consequences were important for those affected ([Sara 2007](#)). In this case, the new track would have had a severe impact on those Sámi affected and their livelihoods.

To conclude, the various stakeholders involved in the public debate framed the case of the Arctic Railway differently. The pros emphasized the economic and developmental aspects of the railway as something that might positively impact the future prospects and well-being of the people. However, those aspects related to the rights of the Sámi as an Indigenous People were not so visible. The contras, in turn, underlined cultural, environmental, Indigenous and human rights aspects and those related to the adverse consequences of the railway construction.

It seems to be that the framing used by pro-railway stakeholders emphasizing economic aspects had a major role in Yle Sápmi's agenda, while other frames presented by contra-railway stakeholders were presented as less prominent counter-frames until 2018. Previous studies have underlined the importance of Indigenous media for democratic processes in Indigenous societies because mainstream media often lack diversity and fail to bring

Indigenous issues to the fore. This has been referred to as ‘a failure of democratic representation and participation’ ([Bacon 2005](#), 20). This study indicates that Indigenous media such as Yle Sápmi and NRK Sápmi do not always succeed in the ambition to contribute to democratic representation and participation when they rely too heavily on elite sources to set the agenda and frame the news coverage. While the Indigenous media holds the promise of presenting ‘our stories, our voices and our perspectives’ and ‘giving a voice to those indigenous individuals affected by the decisions of their indigenous representative bodies’ ([Hafsteinsson 2010](#), 56), this study shows that Indigenous media such as NRK Sápmi and Yle Sápmi sometimes need to ally with civil society and activists to be able to challenge hegemonic frames.

Unless Indigenous activists and Indigenous civil society succeed in making Indigenous matters prominent in majority society media, Indigenous matters risk becoming matters that do not matter when decisions are made. Our main concern here, however, is the importance of Sámi media for democracy and participation in Sámi society. There is a need to enrich public debate and discussions and strengthen diversity within Sámi society. This study shows that the Sámi elites of Finland and Norway are often able to set the Sámi media’s agenda, and other Sámi groups may be in danger of being excluded. The railway case illustrates how little information the Sámi public gets on the opinions and positions of leading Sámi politicians (other than the president of the Sámi Parliament) on issues of great importance for Sámi society. The president of the Sámi Parliament of Finland in 2017 sovereignly dominated the public debate and was chosen as a Sámi source in all news while voices of other Sámi politicians and stakeholders were hardly heard. More research is needed on the role and influence of Indigenous elites on Indigenous media. The lack of existing research in this area is especially striking in light of the large and expanding literature on elites’ agenda-setting power in traditional media.

An extensive existing literature underlines the lack of diversity and understanding of Indigenous issues in mainstream legacy media. However, the Indigenous media shows a similar lack of diversity and insight. When issues such as the Arctic Railway are being reduced to narratives about reindeer herding or business interests, the interests and perspectives of many other Sámi groups and professions such as fishing, tourism and hunting are excluded from the agenda. It is important that Indigenous media research moves beyond merely criticizing mainstream media to employ critical perspectives on the role and function of Indigenous media as well.

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<sup>1</sup> The collected data includes 61 news stories from Yle Sápmi over eight years from 2013 to 2020 and 11 news stories produced by NRK Sápmi over ten years from 2010 to 2019. NRK Sápmi has published their own news stories as well as news stories produced by Yle Sápmi and NRK Troms and Finnmark – NRK’s local office in Norway’s northernmost county. In order to find the stories, we searched NRK’s website and used Google to search the web for keywords such as ‘Arctic railway,’ ‘Arctic Ocean Rail’ and ‘Kirkenes railway’ in Sámi and Norwegian. Yle Sápmi’s online news coverage on the Arctic Railroad plan has been monitored since 2013, and the collected data contains 61 news stories over eight years from 2013 to 2020. We found and analyzed a total of 11 news stories produced by NRK Sápmi over the ten years from 2010 to 2019. In addition, we received help from a reindeer herder who had collected news stories from Sámi and Norwegian media on this case ([Magga 2020](#)). The first news stories were published in 2010 and 2014, while the majority were published between 2017 and 2019. Five news stories were produced by NRK Sápmi and six by the local offices in Troms and Finnmark.

<sup>2</sup> Type 1: Focus on situations; Type 2: Focus on context attributes; Type 3: Focus on risky choices; Type 4: Focus on consequences; Type 5: Focus on the kind of issue; Type 6: Focus on responsibilities.

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication with Iisko Sara on July 15, 2020. Teacher and reindeer herder Iisko Sara was a member of the 2nd Sami Committee that initiated and established the Sámi Parliament and the first Sami test elections in the early 1970s in Finland.

<sup>4</sup> Metsähallitus is the name of the state-owned Finnish Forest Management and Park Services. The Act on Metsähallitus (234/2016) provides that ‘Metsähallitus uses, manages and protects the state’s land and water assets under its control sustainably.’

<sup>5</sup> NRK Troms and Finnmark are region offices for production in Norwegian in the northernmost part of Norway. They belong to NRK’s regional division. NRK Sápmi is a separate division of NRK. It is at the same level as the regional division of NRK Troms, and Finnmark is a subsidiary. NRK Sápmi, NRK Troms and Finnmark do publish each other’s news stories to some extent.

<sup>6</sup> Skolt Sami Village Administration is the representative body of the Skolt Sami in Finland, whose governance model is based on the Sami’s historical administrative, economic, social and political system, the siida system.

<sup>7</sup> International Labor Organization (ILO) convention on the Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples.