BOOK REVIEW

Book review of "*Media culture in nomadic communities*" by Allison Hahn

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Book details

Ethnographers, photographers, film-makers and journalists often portray nomadic communities as exotic, traditional and soon to disappear. Since decades, books and images have appeared that claim to have documented the "last" herders, tribes, pastoralists or transhumants—assuming that the influence of modernity will end their way of life. The book *Media culture in nomadic communities* is refreshing and hopeful in showing how nomadic communities are embracing modernity in ways that improve their mobile lives and transform their image.

The book focuses on the role of modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) within nomadic communities, above all, how these communities use ICTs to gain control over how they are depicted and to express themselves as citizens demanding recognition of their rights. The words in the title "media culture" suggest that all media such as print (newspapers, magazines), broadcast (radio, television) and the Internet will be covered. However, the author Allison Hahn, who teaches Communication Studies at the City University of New York, confines herself mainly to examining the use of mobile phones and the Internet—most probably because these

mobile electronic media have had the most profound influence on mobile peoples.

In her introductory chapter, Hahn brings a critical discussion of the term "nomad" and its often misleading connotations. She then uses the term "herder" throughout the book. However, she did include "nomadic" in its title (perhaps because a wider readership would be attracted by this term).

Her book is based on a decade of research among several herding communities in different countries and continents. Her main sources of data and contextual information are oral history interviews, social media, Internet searches and archival documents such as government reports, ethnographic studies, photographs and newsreels. She uses these to examine diverse perspectives on the lives and concerns of herding communities.

She first gives a general overview of how ICTs have been used by mobile communities—primarily of pastoralist background—taking advantage of solar panels, portable batteries and generators to obviate any need for the landlines and stationary electricity infrastructure on which settled communities depend. She then shows how the use of these ICTs has changed how mobile communities communicate both locally and internationally. She looks mainly at how individuals originating from herder communities use ICTs to engage in advocacy to influence political decision-making.

She offers six cases, each focusing on a particular communicative occurrence: (i) Maasai in Tanzania engaging in international online petitions to demand government

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recognition of their land rights; (ii) Mongolians in northern China (Inner Mongolia) strengthening their ethnic identity through the use of Internet platforms after a fatal protest incident; (iii) Bedouins in the Middle East and North Africa using the Internet to share poetry, giving especially Bedouin women an opportunity to express themselves; (iv) mobile herders taking part in a national referendum by mobile phone organised by the Government of Mongolia; (v) Sámi herders in the European Arctic using ICTs to protest against the loss of reindeer grazing areas; and (vi) Lakota Sioux in Standing Rock in the Dakotas of the USA using the Internet to protest against a pipeline, bringing together protesters from herder communities elsewhere in the world.

In the first case, Hahn describes how Maasai living around the Ngorongoro and Serengeti Conservation areas built networks of international supporters and used them to exert pressure on the Tanzanian government to change land policy. In 2014–2015, Maasai elders joined with Avaaz, an activist platform for online petitions, to raise awareness of the Maasai's eviction from their traditional land. They were able to collect 2.25 million signatures supporting their cause, and the European Parliament (EP) passed a resolution condemning the land grabbing. ICTs also allowed Maasai to present their own arguments in the international debate, such as in the participatory video "Olosho" made by Maasai women in 2015. Unfortunately, the success of this lobbying proved to be ephemeral, as the Maasai are now (2022–2023) being evicted from the same area (Loliondo). However, the case does show how herders are using ICTs to make their struggles known internationally and thus to influence opinions outside of their country. Although the 2015 EP resolution was not binding for other European Union institutions, let alone the Tanzanian government, civil-society organisations could call upon it in their lobbying activities.

In the case in northern China, both mobile and settled Mongolian youth used online message boards to build networks across international borders through which they could challenge narratives of the Chinese government and could express their identity as part of a herder community. The death of a Mongolian herder run over by a Han Chinese coal-truck driver in 2011 led to protests involving online sharing of photos and blogs as well as protest songs on YouTube about the incident. The access to social-media platforms and the sharing of image testimony strengthened the links between ethnic Mongolians in Inner Mongolia and those in independent (Outer) Mongolia and made the former's struggles for ethnic survival within China more widely known.

From the Middle East and North Africa, Hahn brings a case from 2010–2012 of Bedouins using social-media platforms to share Nabati poetry. She highlights how a female poet, Hissa Hilal, sparked debate within the region about Bedouin women's rights, in this case, via a reality TV show. In situations where most Bedouin women have few face-to-face opportunities to take part in public life, they are using modern social media for communication among themselves and with a wider public. Moreover, the audio and video recordings of poetry allow the oral tradition of Bedouin poetry to be continued. As in the case of Mongolian youth, social media allow also Bedouin youth to link with their rural heritage and identify with their people as an ethnic group across borders.

The fourth case describes how the Mongolian government used ICTs to encourage democratic decision-making in a way that was meant to include herders in rural areas: its national referendum in 2015 on mining policy was held by mobile phone. Although the form of the referendum was flawed and the number of voters was low, Hahn argues that the very fact that such a referendum was held using mobile phones created an expectation among Mongolians that their government would continue to reach out to remote herders for feedback on national policy. The Twitter platform also gave Mongolians the opportunity to critique the Government's misleading way of phrasing the referendum question.

The fifth case is about the engagement of Sámi reindeer herders in Finland, Norway and Sweden in joint advocacy, using online petitions and campaigns to fight deep-sea drilling, oil extraction, green-energy generation and railway development. In the period 2015–2020 (and continuing today), social media have helped strengthen the historic networks of Sámi across different countries in the Arctic. Particularly active are youth groups expressing themselves through tweets and YouTube videos. The Sámi also created in-person protests as "image events" (e.g. chains of Sámi community members blocking a proposed railway line) that were filmed and shared through social media to generate international support for their protests.

Also in the case of the Lakota Sioux who organised the Standing Rock protest of 2017 against the expansion of the Dakota Access Pipeline, youth in the community played a major role in using social media to mobilise international support—both online and in person. Hahn refers to this as a "quilting point" where young people coming from herder communities in other parts of the world—Bedouins, Mongolians, Sámi and Kenyans (Samburu)—joined to express support for each other's struggles.

The final chapter on "New herding networks" emphasises how people from herder communities use social media not only to document their struggles and express their protest, but also to create large virtual communities

of people facing similar challenges. These are networks not primarily of people practising herding in remote areas but rather of people who identify as belonging to herder communities and are linked to supporters worldwide. Hahn stresses the mobility of individuals in herder communities between rural and urban areas as they move in and out of a herding-based livelihood and more sedentary sources of livelihood at different times in their lives. This form of mobility is one feature of the adaptation of herder communities to changes in externally created conditions and opportunities.

Particularly for herder communities that live in remote areas such as drylands, highlands or the sparsely populated Arctic, which most international observers are unlikely to visit in person, social media provide opportunities to overcome this remoteness. The six cases show how people from herder communities have become adept in using striking images and narratives that bring practising herders' reality to the attention of the wider society and policy-makers. The "mobile herders" moving between the urban and rural worlds are making innovative use of ICTs to create their own communication networks that amplify their voices and exert influence on decision-making both nationally and internationally—a novum for communities that used to be cut off from external decision-making processes affecting their lives.

Hahn makes passing mention of how herders use ICTs to improve livestock marketing, e.g. through access to market information and mobile banking, but gives little attention to how practising herders use ICTs to facilitate their herding practices and herd movements, e.g. transhumance, for the benefit of their animals and their own livelihoods. Her focus is rather on the social impacts of social media: how ICTs have changed herder communities' relations internally, with the government and with their fellow non-herder citizens. However, the examples in the book do suggest that ICTs can allow mobile lifestyles to flourish—particularly because they reduce remoteness and bring social enrichment for young people and women in herder communities and also because they facilitate engagement with other communities within their countries and across borders. For the many outside observers who—over decades—continue to doubt whether mobile pastoralism can survive, Hahn provides case-study evidence that—also in the twenty-first century—mobile pastoralism is not disappearing. Instead, herder communities are changing with the times and using modern mobile technologies to protect and improve their mobile lives.

Reading the section on "Engaging nomadic scholars" in the final chapter, it struck me that the relationship between herder communities and the book's readership is being mediated solely through the writing of a scholar not from a herder community. I wondered why no chapters of the book were co-authored with research partners from herder communities who are looking into the use and impact of social media—but perhaps that will be the next step. Social media can also be used to spread the story of how ICTs are improving the lives of mobile peoples and to dispel the myth of an approaching demise of pastoralism—and indeed even to elicit feedback from herder communities about the cases and analysis in this book.

As an editor of several books and articles, I cannot refrain from mentioning how poorly edited this book is. It includes several grammatical and spelling errors (e.g. boarders instead of borders), illogical sentence structure, run-on and incomplete sentences, and missing words and references. At least some mistakes are consistent, e.g. quoting Dryer instead of Dyer throughout the book. Hopefully, most readers will not be as irritated as I was with these superficial weaknesses and will appreciate the positive message brought out by the cases and discussion of ICT use by herder communities.

Declarations

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Not applicable.

Consent for publication
My own consent given.

Competing interests
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