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News Narratives and Civic Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Cross-Border Case of Point Roberts

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INTRODUCTION

News media, as an outgrowth of civic culture and communication, can shift existing views of political, economic and ecological life, especially in cross-border contexts. In a bi-national jurisdiction such as Cascadia, which sprawls across the British Columbia/Washington border, news reporters help align prominent political and economic issues with concurrent national or international narratives (see “Reporting on Cascadia: The Evolution of a Cross-Border Media Ecosystem”). This is especially true when major political events with cross-border ramifications serve as a catalyst for extensive media coverage.

Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021, the challenges facing cross-border communities along the Canada–US boundary have been particularly acute. While dozens of such jurisdictions exist along this border, including metropolitan regions, a number of smaller communities face unique circumstances given their challenging geographic situation and subsequent cross-border realities. They include Hyder, Alaska; Minnesota’s Northwest Angle; and Campobello Island, New Brunswick.

Faced with historically unprecedented restrictions of the international border crossing, residents of these communities and many others have been confronted with unique economic, political, and quality-of-life stresses. This includes the separation of family members, the downturn of economic activity associated with the halt of cross-border tourism and visitation, and the navigation of complex regulation for essential cross-border travel including quarantine rules. The unprecedented nature of such cross-border circumstances—including their oddity or counter-intuitive nature—has inevitably attracted extensive media coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the Canada–US border has been closed to non-essential traffic. This media reporting provides insights into the emergent communication ecosystem of stakeholders in cross-border communities, and offers insights into how affected regions might leverage such attention to facilitate efficient policymaking, governance, and public opinion cultivation.
Point Roberts, Washington—an isolated community in the northwest quadrant of Washington state—provides a striking case in point. The community of roughly 1,000 full-time residents has received an inordinate amount of local, regional, and international media attention since the border restrictions during March of 2020. This ongoing media coverage provides important insights into both the ecology of news media in cross-border contexts, but also how different levels of journalism (community, national, international, and digital) interact to cultivate larger media narratives and facilitate dialogue and policy impact during the pandemic emergency.

As a five-square-mile US exclave that is reachable by land travel through British Columbia, Point Roberts’ case is a unique one. Since 2020, residents have been effectively stranded from the US mainland and unable to travel except for essential purposes because of COVID-19 border restrictions (though an emergency walk-on ferry service now provides twice-weekly travel to the US mainland). The plight of residents has received attention from numerous broadcasters, including CNN, CTV, and CBC, but also leading newspapers. A September 1 New York Times feature article described a “paradise…beginning to feel more like Alcatraz.” The Toronto Star published an article about the possibility of Canada buying the community from the United States. This coverage provides a reminder that the Canada-US border often goes unnoticed by the national media, until there is a major disruption event like 2020's COVID-19 border restrictions. Numerous communities—from large metropolitan centers to small cities and towns—have been impacted by the Canada-US border restrictions of 2020 and 2021. The case of Point Roberts presents an important case study, as its unique geography has exacerbated the implications of a restricted border.

Three factors in particular have made Point Roberts’ situation difficult. Firstly, many of Point Roberts’ full-time residents rely on crossing the border into Canada—particularly to the adjacent British Columbia communities of Tsawwassen and Ladner—to access educational, recreational, or work opportunities. Others travel further afield to Richmond, Surrey, and downtown Vancouver for other amenities. Second, a number of Point Roberts’ social and government institutions are part of Whatcom County, Washington, which means that residents must cross the border twice—first into Canada, and then south again into the mainland US—to access various services or opportunities. Residents also make the roundtrip to Bellingham or Blaine for medical services, for schooling, and for shopping.

And thirdly, due to Point Roberts’ close proximity to the metropolitan Vancouver, BC region, a majority of land and homeowners in the community are Canadian, owing to the location’s recreational amenities and resort economy, and more affordable prices (the average house in Point Roberts is valued at roughly $365,000 (USD), which is far less than the over $1 million (USD) average cost for a typical detached family home in adjacent Greater Vancouver). Most of the Canadian-owned homes are used as part-time residences and vacation dwellings, particularly during the summer months. The influx of Canadians between June and September sustains a tourism economy that includes restaurants, bed and breakfasts, a marina, and a golf course. Many Canadians also make short day-trips to the community for groceries, fuel, or to pick up packages at one of several parcel services. These services in turn sustain local employment for full-time residents.

The role of cross-border media

From the perspective of both Canadian and US-based media, Point Roberts is a unique case study of how border restrictions can impact local communities. The publication of newspaper stories covering the local community—such as the monthly Point Roberts Press (5 stories). As a point of comparison, the Seattle Times had published less than 10 stories during this timeframe. The audience for these stories would range from several hundred thousand to several million readers. This underscores the importance of not only metropolitan media services but also national and global news outlets.
## THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL AND NATIONAL MEDIA

Throughout the pandemic and border restrictions, Point Roberts has attracted an inordinate amount of global and national media attention from the likes of the New York Times, the Washington Post, and CNN. A first wave of stories in spring of 2020 highlighted the relationship between Point Roberts’ unique geographic situation and its ability to remain safe from the coronavirus. However, a second emergent narrative about Point Roberts described the dire circumstances for local residents and business owners who were cut off from the rest of their own county and indeed from any other jurisdiction, including Canada but also the state of Washington.

A third wave of stories during the latter part of 2020 and into 2021 focused on the mid- to long-term impacts of this isolation, including the ramifications felt by individuals and families, but also the need for policymakers on both sides of the border to address the community’s struggles with more aggressive and timely solutions. These stories have aligned with government lobbying and public opinion efforts, including a February 22, 2021 letter about the community and larger cross-border difficulties from President Joseph Biden from Washington state members of the United States House of Representatives, as well as similar letters from the state’s US senators and Washington state governor Jay Inslee.

Some of these national/international articles were subsequently circulated in local or hyperlocal social media such as Facebook and Nextdoor, where they generated critique and commentary from local residents. This flow of communication amid media events highlights a unique interplay between international/national media, local newspapers and radio, and hyperlocal social media forums. In some cases, this mediation could exacerbate existing tensions or misunderstandings related to border restrictions, binational issues, or COVID19 travel regulations.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

For cross-border communities facing the direct impacts of COVID-19 border restrictions and complexities, both national and regional media coverage has served multiple purposes even as it takes on sometimes contradictory roles. The case of Point Roberts shows that stories being told nationally and internationally have reached not only mass audiences but also influential policymakers and government leaders. Such coverage from the “outside” also helps prioritize cross-border stories in regional and metropolitan news contexts while also emphasizing the urgent nature of citizens’ concerns. This is especially important for those cross-border communities with particularly acute circumstances owing to geography, including Point Roberts but also Hyder, Alaska; Minnesota’s Northwest Angle; and Campobello Island, New Brunswick.

Such stories certainly feature many of the news values held by media gatekeepers in terms of what stories get told and how: impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity, oddity, conflict, and relevance. Yet for impacted communities, this media coverage fulfills more pressing and localized goals. For cross-border jurisdictions, media stories as well as op-eds have helped to fill bureaucratic and governance gaps. Additionally, new communication norms established during this period create a potential template for future civic engagement. News stories are immersed in a larger ecosystem of advocates, citizen groups, business leaders, academics, government officials, and to discuss opportunities for civic engagement and citizen involvement.

Community media, meanwhile, is shown here to serve a key role in facilitating journalistically responsible dialogue between a multitude of cross-border stakeholders, including local citizens, national media, and regional policymakers and experts.
as it also involves consulates, think tanks, and other foreign exchange enterprises. As a result, it is expected that post-pandemic media institutionally should be better positioned to inform their publics.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, no small community in North America has arguably received as much media attention and journalistic focus as Point Roberts. During the Canada–US border restrictions that have limited the movement of local residents, national and international media stories about the jurisdiction have oscillated between narratives of paradise and dystopia. Along with the ongoing theme of isolation, media have focused on the community’s especially low COVID-19 rate but also its sometimes-confusing convergence of governing jurisdictions and regional authorities.

Despite these larger narratives that serve audiences with a fleeting, curious interest in the community, these stories have had hyperlocal and longer-lasting impacts. Reporting about Point Roberts has provided information, utility, advocacy, calls to action, and rhetorical narratives. To this end, residents of cross-border communities along the Canada–US border continue to draw from a combination of national, metropolitan, and local media, as well as social media forums and public policy documents, to forge a successful path forward in navigating this historic social crisis.

ENDNOTES
