

UNMASKING DEEP DEMOCRACY: AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF INDIGENOUS MEDIA IN CANADA. Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson. 2013. Aarhus: Intervention Press. 210 p, illustrated, softcover. ISBN 978-87-92724-08-3. 216 DKK

The term ‘Deep Democracy’ refers to the belief that all voices, including the voices of the minority, have value. Deep Democracy is not about the practices of majority rule or money/power rule, but about the inherent importance of all viewpoints. Those who exercise Deep Democracy encourage participatory engagement to create a reality that reflects the experiences of all members of the community.

Unmasking deep democracy: an anthropology of indigenous media in Canada, the doctoral research conducted by Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson, analyses the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network in Canada (APTN) as an exercise in Deep Democracy. The book challenges the popular tendency to analyse all media organisations as if they share the same purposes and goals. In contrast to the standard media practice of catering to the programming wishes of a majority of viewers, the author’s research shows APTN to be an organisation that makes efforts to meet the interests of even the smallest viewer groups while struggling to attract advertising dollars that base investments on more familiar practices.

The book begins with a discussion of existing misconceptions about indigenous peoples in Canada. Particular attention is paid to portrayals of indigenous peoples by the media. In light of the numerous stereotypes propagated by popular media, a strong case is made that an ethnographic approach to studying indigenous media is more suited to understanding the true nature of the role of APTN than a more quantitative approach. Indigenous peoples have been the subjects of numerous studies conducted by community outsiders, and have become resistant to being the subjects of new well intentioned but inaccurate studies.

However, the author’s discussion about his difficulties in gaining access to the community ended up distracting from his argument. While his explanation of why he had to alter his research approach was important, at times the explanation had negative undertones. This negativity was especially apparent in his field notes excerpt regarding a respected indigenous leader in which he referred to the elder as ‘demanding’ (page 18), showed impatience with indigenous concepts of time, and misunderstood communications styles stating that the elder was not ‘present’ (page 19). Based on that excerpt, the author’s lack of cultural understanding was displayed, especially considering the status that elders hold in the community. Criticism aside, it would be a mistake to dismiss this study as another misrepresentation. The remainder of the book does provide excellent data and ideas about the role that APTN plays in both the media world and in the overall community narrative. Instead, his experience may serve as a useful reminder to other scholars that indigenous people are no longer the passive study subjects that they were once deemed to be. Community cooperation needs to be earned, and will not be given based only on a researcher’s assurance that he is sympathetic to community concerns.

The analysis of how APTN management applies the principles of Deep Democracy to the governing structure, pro-

gramming choices, and in particular the news programming of APTN makes up the bulk of the book. These analyses encapsulate the value of using the ethnographic approach and allowing community members to share their perceptions leads Hafsteinsson to some valuable conclusions.

Analyzing APTN’s governing structure using only western democracy ideals would make it appear unfair and non-representative. However, if it is looked at through an indigenous perspective of democracy as the author does, which is less about majority representation and more about the equitable representation of all community voices, then the structure makes perfect sense. While regional representation is the foundation of the structure, it actually acts as more of a minority rule than a majority rule structure. Yet, by structuring it this way, all segments within the community have a voice. Only by acknowledging the validity of indigenous definitions of democracy will scholars be able to understand the role that indigenous media fills within indigenous communities. Looking at it from this perspective supports the author’s thesis that the network functions as an exercise in Deep Democracy.

The network programming choices demonstrate an acknowledgment by APTN management of the audience’s varied interests. While many non-indigenous groups view indigenous communities as one generic group, APTN management recognizes that many different indigenous communities exist within the physical boundaries of Canada. These groups have their own languages, cultures, and values that need to be acknowledged. APTN programming decisions consider all of these voices, not just the voices that are the loudest or have acquired the most power. The author suggests that scholars should use a transnational approach to help them more accurately analyse APTN programming decisions instead of viewing the target audience as members of only one nation.

The book also reviews some of the difficulties the network has faced while attempting to use aboriginal languages in programming. The station is committed to supporting aboriginal languages, but programming still needs to serve the needs of the entire community, leading to difficult programming decisions. This focus on the many demands of the audience and the attempt to respond to the varied concerns demonstrates again why the ideals of Deep Democracy apply so well to APTN’s practices.

Of particular interest was the discussion about the news and current affairs programming, which is the only in-house production. While mainstream media news coverage focuses on cases that will matter to the majority of viewers, APTN makes an effort to go to rural areas and areas with a small population base to ensure that the news and current events that impact all communities are being reported. This valuing of even the most minor stories again differentiates it from the mainstream media.

The network practices are not without criticism. As Hafsteinsson points out, some community members feel that the network does not adequately represent their voices. Others criticise the governance structure or argue that not enough programs are being broadcast in aboriginal languages. Differing ideas exist about the true mandate that the network is expected to live up to, which leads to confusion among both supporters and opponents regarding whether or not it is actually doing what it was created to do.

Through all of the data about conflicting ideas and structures, Hafsteinsson makes a persuasive argument that viewing the APTN from a Deep Democracy perspective will assist scholars in comprehending the true nature of this indigenous media entity. Viewing it from other paradigms will cause scholars to miss the true value that this net-

work can bring to the field of visual media and communications as well as to indigenous studies (Victoria Sweet, Michigan State University College of Law, Indigenous Law and Policy Center, 648 North Shaw Lane, Office 405, East Lansing, Michigan 48823, USA (victoria.g.sweet@gmail.com)).