

POLES APART

As the climate crisis unravels and reshapes the world, the Arctic is under increased scrutiny. Tom Flanagan speaks to five journalists working from one of the world's most inhospitable environments

Jenna Kunze steps outside. It's -40 degrees Celsius in Utqiagvik, the United States' northernmost community and home to one of the largest settlements of

Indigenous Alaskans, known as the Iñupiat. Stretches of blueish tundra race towards the horizon. A dusken glow settles. She's gone three months without daylight and braves the elements for 10 minutes to savour the short burst of half-light reappearing – that doesn't stop the frostbite on her cheek from forming. But the view, albeit for a moment, is worth it.

"It's like being on Mars," says Kunze – a reporter covering predominantly Alaskan and Arctic news – who spent months in Utqiagvik, a community located North of the Arctic Circle. "There are horizons of tundra for miles and miles because it's all frozen over. When I tell people about my time in the North, they often ask me, 'Why would people choose to live there?' And the answer is because it's some people's ancestral homeland. For Indigenous people, if your family has been tied to the land for generations, that's what you call home."

The notion of the Arctic is complicated in the eyes of the world, but it's rarely seen as synonymous with home. If anything, the media is prone to positioning it as an

inhabitable climate in every sense – a world quite literally melting as a consequence of the climate crisis and a place where native and Indigenous communities are fighting to survive. That's true even if these native communities have been adapting to the climate for centuries, but the speed of the environmental change around them stands to be the reason the Arctic is attracting increasing attention.

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According to the Arctic Council – one of the leading bodies promoting intergovernmental cooperation in the Arctic – temperatures in the region are rising at three times the global average of 1.1 degrees Celsius; shifting the landscape of the icy North and its wildlife, and with that driving increasingly turbulent weather patterns around the world. Beyond climate, the war in Ukraine has placed more stress on Europe's energy sources making the

divide between Russia and the Nordic region in the North Sea even more contentious. And the recent discovery of rare earth metals in Arctic Sweden – now Europe's biggest deposit of the kind – makes for an area ripe for cultivating. Understanding what is going on in the region then, has arguably never been more important.

And yet, little is known of what life in the Arctic is really like, beyond a form of fabled mysticism most often promoted by Western media. Even less is known of what it means to report from one of the most inhospitable regions of the world, the beats that reporters cover, how they source stories and most pressingly, how they survive.

Gloria Dickie, the climate and environment correspondent for *Reuters* who has reported from across the Arctic, says that the misconception global media fuels around the region and its people being disconnected, that is far from the truth. "The main thing that's often struck me as an environmental reporter is the lack of remoteness," she says. Roads are everywhere. People are everywhere. The fingerprints of human activity are almost everywhere you look. The soloness is amplified by the Arctic landscape but it's actually very hard to feel alone."

Loneliness or a lack of connectedness isn't something that necessarily lingers – unlike the cold. The logistics of reporting

out there are acutely different from other areas in the world because you're dealing with a much harsher climate. "You can't prepare for the cold," says Dickie. "It sounds simple but when you're working and writing in cold places like that, you need things like hand warmers in your pockets to keep your batteries warm."

Kunze – a journalist originally hailing from New York who spent months living out in northernmost Alaska after being granted money by Pulitzer to report on what it was like for local Alaskans living on the front lines of the climate crisis – knows this well. She said it changed her perspective forever.

"I went out there because I felt the need to immerse myself in the communities and experience what it was like for myself," says Kunze, who had always been drawn to environmental topics and wanted to write on beats that would take her far away from her native New York. "There is a lot of gloom-and-doom language surrounding the Arctic, particularly coming from journalists. But the Indigenous communities out there have a complex relationship with the environment as well as the United States. Ask them about the effects of the climate crisis and they'll say 'We've been fighting it for years. We'll adapt.'"

Community is at the centre of Arctic journalism. After all, in places where there's

often only a few hundred people, the only way to find a story is through these people. Stories then tend to be hyper local. In Kunze's experience, fishing and ice melts became the topics she ended up mainly reporting on, even if the climate crisis remained the wider backdrop.

These communities play a central role in any story of the Arctic but historically have often been forgotten about, or worse, silenced. It's one reason why Kunze partnered with Indigenous reporter and Iñupiat Alice Qannik Glenn on her Pulitzer-funded story, as much for access as a way of giving Indigenous people a voice to tell the story on their own terms. The two spent months in Glenn's hometown, working on stories across fishing and whaling practices, community access to education which is harder to come by, and sewage restructuring as a result of the changing climate. "Villages are built on sea ice and the houses are built into the permafrost," she explains. "Meaning when it melts and thaws water spouts through."

Notions of access and the language used by non-Arctic writers are a central part of successful reporting in the Arctic region, says Jimmy Thomson, a northern-focused journalist from Canada. He has reported for *National Geographic*, *VICE*, and the Canadian environmental investigative journal *The Narwhal*, from Arctic Norway as well as some of Canada's northernmost territories.

"Words like remote and wilderness are ones a lot of Indigenous communities in Canada will bristle at," explains Thomson. "Yes, these communities are incredibly hard and expensive to get to. But what might be in the middle of nowhere to us as people from the city, is usually the middle of someone's home. It's someone's territory, it's someone's trap line, and it's someone's highway in and out of their community. We might feel like we're in the middle of nowhere, but it's the middle of somewhere to somebody."

Access is a notable challenge any journalist in the Arctic faces. That means both with people and logistically. Roads are everywhere – that doesn't mean they're easily traversed. Kunze says she went dog-mushing for one story – essentially a sled pulled by dogs – to get to where she needed to be. It's not standard, but it's not uncommon either for alternative means of transport in an unpredictable climate that often involves crossing ice. Thomson recalls one anecdote he came across while working on a story – around buoys that help measure ice thickness to improve safety of travel – that encapsulates the unique perils of reporting in the Arctic.

"A friend of somebody I knew was travelling by Ski-doo while out hunting," he says. "He told me this harrowing story of going through the ice and being rescued on an island not far from there. I think he had to spend the night just shivering in the dark. So when it came time to write a story, I wasn't just writing about some abstract idea. I suddenly could call up a person and say 'Here are the stakes.'"

And because of the climate, it's an area

Annie Spratt



that is not just physically challenging but one that is logistically hard and expensive to plan. Thomson says it's one reason why going to the Arctic means you have to be more than just a writer. "I have often been the only reporter on an assignment," explains Thomson. "I'm not sent with a photographer or a videographer so I might be expected to do all those things that traditionally an entire team would."

In the case of both Thomson and Kunze, they spent time out in the communities, building relationships and cultivating trust. For Indigenous communities, that's crucial. Kunze explains that people would not have spoken to her had it not been for Glenn who grew up in Utqiagvik. "Journalists are poorly received in these communities," says Kunze. "And that's because the people have been so misrepresented."

It also gave her a support system to cope with the weather patterns. Every year from November to January, Utqiagvik experiences darkness, with the closest light resembling something akin to dusk, says Kunze. "I didn't appreciate how much not seeing the sun would affect me," she says. "Alice's cousin would take me to the gym and we'd workout together which became a lifeline as you couldn't do much else. It's a totally different experience working up there versus in an urban environment further south."

Few reporters are really ever prepared for reporting in the region. Worse, many come with assumptions about the people that live in the North, othering them through their emphasis on the Arctic's perceived distance from 'the world'. JohnJo Devlin, a Scandinavia correspondent who writes for *The Economist* and *VICE* among others, recognises this as a crucial dialogue in the region and one that journalists need to be helping to change. "We shouldn't be exoticising the region and its communities. People in these places don't often feel like they're at the edge of the world," he says. "They feel like they're at the centre of it."

Part of the issue beyond the mislabelling is the preconceptions urban media and writers bring with them. Indigenous communities in the Arctic live off age-old traditions that include activities like whale hunting and these aren't often adherent to global regulatory and ethical standards. And the greenwashing and judgement reporters bring

with them builds a sense of mistrust among Arctic communities.

"Journalists are perceived to be evil, which means getting in the door is hard," explains Devlin, who's spent time with whalers in the Barents Seas and wolf hunters in the Østfold region of Norway. "That's because these communities have always been given a bad rap. You need to invest and earn their trust. Because when you spend time with people who grew up with these traditions, it changes your perception." Those connections are imperative. When Jimmy Thomson was posted to the Arctic, he cites his network as the make or break factor. "You're dealing with a very small community, and if you hack people off or you do really bad reporting, you probably won't get a second chance," he says. "Whereas if you do have those connections and you make that network, people will help you. They're all connected."

"The climate crisis is alarming. I feel it everywhere. It's grief"

With technology increasingly pervasive, there's no escaping the world's gaze online. Kunze recalls one story of an Indigenous teenage boy who published a picture of his first bowhead whale killing, a rite of passage in the community. Upon posting it, he received huge waves of backlash on social media and ended up in a severe depression for months.

The task of reporting in the Arctic is daunting and the attention it's being given only looks set to grow. "The world has these Arctic dreams," says Dickie of the mythicism the Arctic has long been associated with. "But it's becoming an increasingly fruitful space for geopolitics."

Where then, does that leave the wildlife and the people who call it home? And whose story will be remembered in the years to come? Inupiaq journalist Laureli Ivanoff isn't sure. She lives in Unalakleet – one of Alaska's westernmost cities and the place she is from – but still feels the world's focus and the climate crisis play out all around her. Hopelessness in her community hasn't quite

set in, but there's a realisation that life as they know it is changing.

"Change is happening all the time," she says. "The climate crisis is alarming. I feel it everywhere. It's grief. Because I know that my community of 750 people can't stop it." It's an experience she's written about, about climate and loss, for publications like *The New York Times*, in hope of injecting the personal into a crisis that feels overwhelmingly large.

Even still, she says there is work being done by Indigenous communities to reclaim some agency in the story of the shifting Arctic and its effect on them. "Capitalism is huge but we're doing what we can to be proactive about what's to come. Knowing our town is going to be underwater in however many years means we have to be. So many stories are victimising us, calling communities like ours climate refugees. But we're not just sitting here waiting for it to happen."

That doesn't stop the sadness from creeping in. While the climate and the Arctic might seem otherworldly or far away, Ivanoff says there are real lives at stake – lives, like those of her family, who may never know the Arctic she does. "I wrote something about the climate crisis for *The New York Times*, but it was incredibly personal. It was about my son.

"When I think about the warming of the Bering Sea, that's what it comes back to. It hurts because I see how fast things are changing. And I'm left wondering what he's going to experience and what he's not ultimately going to experience, of this great life that we have."



Image credit: Dylan Shaw