CHamoru Digital Activism and the Anti/Colonial Media Binary in Guåhan

Manuel Cruz

Figure 1. A popular Guåhan landmark, the statue of Chief Kepuha in the island's capital, is shackled in red, white, and blue chains as part of the People for Peace Rally in 2017.

Introduction

Guåhan is one of seventeen remaining Non-Self-Governing Territories recognized by the United Nations that have yet to decolonize from its administering power. The island is also one of the most important US bases due to both its geographic location and political ambiguity. In the US national consciousness, Guåhan is referred to as "the tip of America's spear," "Fortress Guam," and even more ominously, in light of Indigenous sovereignty, "America's permanent aircraft carrier."[1] Stewart Firth makes a point that "generally, the greater the strategic value of an island territory the less likely that territory has been to proceed to sovereign status."[2] This appears to be the case with Guåhan, as the island is center stage in the US's realignment of forces in the Asia-Pacific region, which involve large-scale military increases and the transfer of thousands of US Marines from Okinawa to the island—a move which will "overwhelm Guam's infrastructure, create economic hardship, and cause serious cultural and environmental damage."[3]

It must be emphasized that the military realignment is not a project of the people of Guåhan's choosing through a democratic process. Rather, the people's involvement in any semblance of an official process has been limited to a number of public meetings and commenting periods orchestrated by the US Department of Defense over the past decade with no bearing on the US's plans to press on with the military buildup. As Robert McChesney states: "Militarism and democracy is a contradiction. This isn't even a controversial point."[4] Despite the antidemocratic, asymmetrical relationship the CHamoru people have with the US and the military, mainstream media on the island, at best, only further obfuscate the terms of Guåhan's colonization. At worst, they openly support its continued oppression in stark contradiction of news media's self-mythologizing as an apparatus that can create informed democratic change.

Responding to mainstream media's function as a colonial apparatus, CHamoru decolonization activists and influencers have taken to digital media "to cultivate interpersonal networks online and to mobilize those networks to engage in live and mediated collective action" while enabling CHamorus to self-represent their interests, voices, and movement in public spaces while bypassing traditional media channels.[5] In this essay, I address this site of contention, which I refer to as the anti/colonial media binary, and argue that CHamoru digital activism represents an intervention into an extant colonial media culture that, historically, has operated through print media.

Understanding digital activism in Guåhan and other islands plagued by American colonialism and militarization thus requires both a contemporary and historical digital cultural analysis.

Mainstream Media as a Colonial Apparatus

The contemporary mainstream mediascape on Guåhan presents a limited range of perspectives on key issues like decolonization and Indigenous rights. Using quantitative critical discourse analytical methods, Francis Dalisay concludes that local mainstream media institutions—namely the longest-running and most consumed news source, the *Pacific Daily News (PDN)*—(re)enculturate Guam residents with pro-American ideologies with few exceptions.[6] For instance, Placed in historical context, this comes as little surprise.[7]

The *PDN* was first published as the *Navy News* in 1945 as a means of keeping US Navy sailors culturally connected to and informed of affairs in the continental US.[8] The editorial staff then consisted solely of white men, with news coverage that reflected predominant interests in global and US national affairs and discourse. For most of media's history on the island, the majority of reporters have come from the continental US to fill editorial vacancies, leading to the filtering of ethnic, cultural, political, social, and historical nuances of the island through white, hetero, and male perspectives, which have become the standard for public discourse on Guåhan.[9]

In 1978, activist and historian Robert Underwood led a protest against the *PDN* with the CHamoru rights organization PARA (People's Alliance for Responsive Alternatives) for the paper's refusal to print submissions written in the CHamoru language, calling on the community to burn *PDN* publications.[10] Both broadcast radio and television news on Guåhan also share in a tradition of *haole*-owned media discourse propagated "through their tone of voice, their frequent inferences to 'how things are in the mainland' (that is the United States), and their posture of being knowledgeable about local affairs" in a "systematic campaign against Chamorros."[11] Today, mainstream media on the island continues to propagate colonial narratives imbued with white paternalist, pro-American discourses which trivialize the issue of decolonization, underscoring Glen Coulthard's point that, under the politics of recognition, the inclusion of Indigenous peoples and their perspectives are allowed only in such a way that "the foundation of the colonial relationship remains relatively undisturbed."[12]

Nascent research on digitally mediated social movements looked unfavorably on digital participation, referring to it as "slacktivism," suggesting that digital participation would have a negative effect on non-digital engagement. However, contemporary data indicates the opposite—that there is "a significant positive effect of public sharing on willingness to volunteer" and engage in other prosocial behaviors.[13] Margetts et al. further assert the value of social media to grassroots movements is its ability to "alter the costs and benefits of political actions, reducing the transaction costs of getting involved," resulting in "micro-donations" of time and money which are cumulatively impactful.[14]

Transoceanic Digital Decolonial Solidarity

Evidence of digital media's potential as a liberatory medium in the struggle for decolonization can already be gleaned from contemporary transoceanic Indigenous and/or decolonial movements. Digital media was integral to the #IdleNoMore movement in 2012, allowing activists to "write the movement as it was happening on the ground" against an "extremely racist" Canadian mediascape.[15] Likewise, scholars looking to the ongoing Mauna Kea struggle perceive Indigenous activists engaging in digital media production as communicators themselves whose actions facilitate public participation and mobilization,[16] countering mainstream media's reliance on state and corporate perspectives that reproduce and reinforce anti-sovereignty discourses against Native Hawaiians.[17] Across the transoceanic colonial axis, two other examples follow—in Puerto Rico and at Ihumātao in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Protesters in Puerto Rico used the hashtag #RickyRenunciaYa to pressure the island's governor to resign after a leaked 889-page Telegram chat showed then-Governor Ricky Rosselló and other government officials, among numerous offenses, making homophobic slurs and mocking Puerto Ricans who died during Hurricane Maria.[18] Rosselló ultimately resigned. At Ihumātao, an ancestral Māori site where the corporation Fletcher Residential plans to build a 480-unit housing development, nearly one thousand Māori activists and allies are occupying the site in protest to stop the development and return stolen lands using the hashtags #protectIhumātao and #protectIhumatao. Clearly, trends in CHamoru digital activism are consistent with a growing number of transoceanic Indigenous and/or decolonial movements that engage in mediated hegemonic contests against colonial mainstream media.

(Re)reading the August 2017 Missile Crisis

The 9 August 2017 nuclear threat made against Guåhan by North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un presents researchers with an interesting case study of the dynamics of an anti/colonial media binary on Guåhan—both the mainstream media's entrenchment in US colonial order and CHamoru digital media's ability to redefine narratives in public discourse opposing dominant discourses. On the day of the threats, the *Pacific Daily News* published an article headlined, "Trust in God, Military."[19] The *PDN* makes an obvious but nonetheless interesting comparison between God and the US military, implying that the two entities—an omniscient and timeless metaphysical being and an implement of US aggression that operates globally to protect the country's economic interests, respectively—are equal in power and righteousness. The discussion over decolonization thus is complicated by *PDN's* assertion that the US military is at once unquestionable and inherently good, exuding the qualities of godliness. While one could argue that the article merely reflects an existing belief in society, under the logic of Critical Discourse Analysis, discursive events are understood to not only be shaped by society but to be active in shaping society as well.[20]

In response to the threats, CHamoru activism organizations coordinated the People for Peace Rally, marking a clear turning point for the narratives surrounding the missile threats from a colonial rhetoric of prayerful, hopeful dependency on US military presence and power to a rhetoric of anti-militarism in Asia-Pacific and global denuclearization (including the US) which inherently calls to question the reasons why North Korea would threaten Guåhan in the first place. Organizers made it a clear point of the rally that "real peace lies with demilitarization on Guam," and "if the U.S. hadn't colonized the island, North Korea wouldn't aim its missiles toward Guam."[21]

The Anti/Colonial Media Binary and Discursive Shifts

This reversal of the missile threat discourse successfully drew the curiosity of the large swath of international news media representatives who flooded into Guåhan to capture the end of the world firsthand. The BBC, for instance, published an article titled "Guam: A conflicted island at the centre of a firestorm,"[22] which illustrates the island's colonial status by covering the historical land condemnation by the US military and the ongoing threat it poses to the safety and survival of the CHamoru people.[23]

Figure 2. Rally attendees gather at the close of the event to listen to a speech by Dr. Kenneth Gofigan Kuper.

Hundreds of island residents outside the periphery of decolonization and demilitarization activism attended the People for Peace Rally, from Indigenous cultural practitioners to non-Indigenous academic faculty members, government workers, and a number of local senators which aided to the optics of the rally as a united, mainstream movement against US colonialism, global nuclearization, and the militarization of CHamoru lands. The event was a success partly because of the preexisting digital media presence and international solidarity work of decolonization and demilitarization groups like Independent Guåhan and Prutehi Litekyan, which already occupied a space in both mainstream media and digital media. Independent Guåhan, in particular, uses social media to enhance its outreach by live-streaming monthly meetings with community members, posting educational material to its Facebook page, and operating a podcast (*Fanachu!*).

To be clear, I am not arguing that digital activism alone can amass and sustain a large-scale Indigenous and/or decolonial social movement. A number of scholars cited in this essay also share a skepticism of such techno-optimism on the grounds that it provides a shortcut around establishing Indigenous connectivity and relationalities. A second criticism is that the

Internet, including social media, are part of the fabric of what Shoshana Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism."[24] As Simpson, Walcott, and Coulthard state, "The Internet and digital technologies have become a powerful site for reinforcing and amplifying settler colonialism."[25] However, the argument that the utilization of the Internet itself will upend Indigenous and/or decolonial social movements is deterministic and fails to see how Indigenous peoples themselves assert agency over the Internet as a technology for change, so long as such utility is supplementary to, and not the basis of, organizational communication and Indigenous relationality. As T. V. Reed states, "Technologies are always used in particular cultural contexts which reshape them even as they reshape the cultural contexts."[26] Therefore, how digital media is used has more bearing on Indigenous and/or decolonial movements than digital media itself.

Conclusion

Guåhan is at the forefront of decolonial struggle against the United States and its plans to stage a buildup of military forces on the island, overwhelming the island's infrastructure, creating economic hardship, and causing serious cultural and environmental damage. Indigenous decolonization and demilitarization activists using digital media are engaged in a hegemonic contest against an extant colonial mainstream mediascape which, far from the mythos of journalism as an entity supports informed democratic change, further obfuscates the terms of Guåhan's colonization. Using the 2017 People for Peace Rally, I have examined the contestation of both media structures through the anti/colonial media binary and argue that digital media presents CHamoru decolonization activists with the ability "to cultivate interpersonal networks online and to mobilize those networks to engage in live and mediated collective action"[27] while enabling CHamoru to self-represent their interests, voices, and movement in public spaces while bypassing traditional media channels.[28] Thus, as a supplement to grounded political struggle, digital media will be integral to the further development of a transoceanic inter-movement solidarity for decolonization and Indigenous sovereignty.

Notes:

1   Michael Lujan Bevacqua and Manuel L. Cruz, "The Banality of Guam," *The Journal of Transnational American Studies* (Forthcoming 2019): 13.

2   Stewart Firth, "Sovereignty and Independence in the Contemporary Pacific," *The Contemporary Pacific* 1, no. 1 (1989): 75–76.

3   Bevacqua and Cruz, "The Banality of Guam," 13.

4   Robert McChesney, "Between Cambridge and Palo Alto," *Catalyst* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 24.

5   Leah A. Lievrouw, *Alternative and Activist New Media* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2011), 25; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), Location No. 3501.

6   Francis Dalisay, "Social Control in an American Pacific Island," *Journal of Communications Inquiry* 33, no. 3 (July 2009): 239–257.

7   Market Research and Development Inc., *Guam Media Study 2018*, (June 2018).

8   Manuel L. Cruz, "Fanachu: A Critical Analysis of Native Activism on Guåhan in 2015-2017" (MA Thesis, University of Guam, 2017), 43–44.

9   Ronald Stade, *Pacific Passages: World Culture and Local Politics in Guam* (Stockholm: Stockholm Studies in Anthropology, 1998), 145–158.

10   Laurel Monnig, "PARA-PADA," Guampedia, 27 June 2018, www.guampedia.com/para-pada/

11   Stade, *Pacific Passages,* 152.

12   Glen Coulthard, "Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the Politics of Recognition in Canada," *Contemporary Political Theory* 6, no. 4 (Nov. 2007): 451.

13   Daniel S. Lane and Sonya Dal Cin, "Sharing Beyond Slacktivism: The Effect of Socially Observable Prosocial Media Sharing on Subsequent Offline Helping Behavior." *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 11 (July 2017), 1523–1540.

14   Helen Margetts et al., *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 198.

15   Ibid.

16   Silvia Ravazzani and Carmen Daniela Maier, "Framing of Issues Across Actors: Exploring Competing Discourses in Digital Arenas," *Journal of Communication Management* 21, no. 2 (2017): 186–200.

17   Marisa Peryer, "Native Hawaiians on Coverage of Mauna Kea Resistance," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 29 July 2019, www.cjr.org/opinion/mauna-kea-telescope-protest-hawaii.php.

18   Ed Morales, "It's About More Than Ricky," *Jacobin,* 2 August 2019, www.jacobinmag.com/2019/08/puerto-rico-socialist-spring-ricardo-rossello.

19   Shawn Raymundo, "Officials Downplay NoKorea Threat as Residents Hope, Pray," *Pacific Daily News* 9 August 2017, www.guampdn.com/story/news/2017/08/09/homeland-no-imminent-threat-guam-marianas/551183001/.

20   David Machin and Andrea Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* (London: SAGE Publications, 2012), 9.

21   Shawn Raymundo, "Guam Residents Rally for Peace amid Missile Crisis," *Pacific Daily News*, 14 August 2017, www.guampdn.com/story/news/2017/08/14/guam-residents-rally-peace-amid-north-korean-missile-crisis/563928001/.

22   "Guam: A Conflicted Island at the Centre of a Firestorm." *BBC*, 17 August 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40957419.

23   Ibid.

24   Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

25   Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Rinaldo Walcott and Glen Coulthard, "Idle No More and Black Lives Matter: An Exchange," *Studies in Social Injustice* 12, no. 1 (2018):

     79.

26 T. V. Reed, *Digitized Lives: Culture, Power and Social Change in the Internet Era* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 11.

27 Lievrouw, *Alternative and Activist New Media,* 25.

28 Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, Location No. 3501.

Bio: Manuel Lujan Cruz is a PhD Candidate at Auckland University of Technology. He is a CHamoru decolonization activist and journalist from Guåhan with an interest in Indigenous activism and media. Cruz is also a UN Indigenous Fellow and has advocated for the rights of the CHamoru people in Geneva, Switzerland.