

DOSSIER

Coastal Media
(ed. Alix Johnson)

Introduction to “Coastal Media”

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Fiber-optic cable systems span oceans. Data storage facilities are increasingly built offshore. Sonar surveillance networks scan for sound underwater, intercepting it long before it reaches land. Many media infrastructures, if followed long enough, eventually wind their way to the sea. Viewed in this light, oceans are integral to communication: not only as sites where media is stationed, but as environments with, and through which, media is made. Coasts, then, as interfaces between land and water – and thus ecological, political, and social systems – are places where the practicalities, possibilities, and politics of media systems get worked out.

Nicole Starosielski clears the ground for a conversation on coastal media in her analysis of fiber-optic cables as aquatic infrastructures. While these cables may ultimately reach the urban centers that animate much communications research, Starosielski shows they make first contact at shorelines, traversing “rural, remote, and island locations” (2015, 14). Here they negotiate seismic activity, colonial legacies, environmental advocacy, errant fishing trawlers, competing modes of expertise in the industry, and, occasionally, curious sharks.

The following work is inspired by Starosielski’s attention to coastlines as sites where media systems take shape. At the same time, the pieces that follow push and play with these spaces, exploring the bounds of, and entanglements between, “environment” and “media.” These creative and

experimental interventions probe the liveness, as well as the volatility, of the coastline. Coasts, after all, are zones of productive encounter as well as spaces of risk, threat, and violence. Today, two particularly acute formulations of coastlines reconfigured as frontlines are the disastrous and unevenly distributed manifestations of anthropogenic climate change (Adams 2009, Bankoff 2002), and the “crisis” in immigration that conditions the deployment of deadly neglect, racial hatred, and intensified surveillance and securitization at the shore (Smythe 2018).

The authors in this collection illustrate both the potential for, and the urgency of, analyzing communications at these coastal meeting points. Elizabeth Miller’s interactive mapping project, *The Shore Line*, invites readers into a range of coastal communities actively confronting climate disaster. Shirley Roburn’s meditation on our relationship to whale songs raises questions of whose “voice” is heard at the shore. Hunter’s exploration of production on the Icelandic shoreline makes visible – and visceral – coastal livelihoods. Finally, Suhaimi’s analysis of shifting fishing infrastructures in the Johor Straits draws out ongoing colonial legacies, as well as interspecies collaborations on the coast. Taken together, these reflections explore “becoming environmental” on the coastline, and demonstrate how we might benefit from situating media more within these murky waters.

References

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