

Critical Essay

Social Media, the Folk, and Bizarre Stories of Nova Scotia

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Abstract

This essay recounts a number of so-called “bizarre” news reports from Nova Scotia, and the reactions to them on social media, as a means of exploring the fruitfulness of a digital history approach to regionalism and the idea of the provincial “Folk.” Such stories might be considered a contemporary manifestation of the Folk - albeit one that is presented through a digital medium that creates opportunities for cultural producers and consumers to enter into conversation about the style, context, and meaning of such representations. The essay is exploratory and offers some tentative conclusions - particularly that the phenomenon of “bizarre” news reports from the province is very heavily affected by class conflict, but that social media allows a new generation of cultural producers the means to talk back to Folk representations of Nova Scotia. However, the essay is largely concerned with making a connection between media studies of what has been called “convergence culture” and more traditional studies of Atlantic Canadian society and culture.

Keywords : bizarre, Folk, Nova Scotia, social media, digital history, news stories.

Introduction

Nova Scotians are a bizarre bunch. At least, that is the impression that one might come away with from a growing collection of stories in Canadian media about the quirks, oddities, and uncommon occurrences that apparently characterize much of life in Canada’s Ocean Playground. From the Huffington Post coverage of *This, That, and The Other* streets in Porter’s Lake (“Funny Street Names” 2013) to

an incident at the Parrsboro Tim Hortons wherein a man broke into the coffee franchise to brew himself a beverage (Lipscombe 2015), such pieces can be read as humorous collections of the absurd. Sometimes, they uncomfortably turn tragedies into comedy. A 2014 article in Metro News, for instance, describes a double stabbing in Halifax that saw one injured man return from the hospital and attack his assailant – his roommate. Instead of exploring the serious issues at play in that sad circumstance, drug and alcohol dependency and economic disparity chief among them, the author was content to fall back upon the easy nostrums of the provincial “bizarre.” Thus, a story about a man being “stabbed several times to his body” in a prolonged attack that resulted in charges of attempted murder and aggravated assault was leavened into easily digestible entertainment more suitable for a breakfast-table chuckle or a raised eyebrow on the morning commute (Croucher 2014).¹

These stories are not unique to Nova Scotia. One Newfoundland event went international when the London daily paper *The Guardian* covered a story about a St. John’s boy who won a bowling competition only to have his gold medal stripped from him as the result of a technical rule prohibiting the wearing of jeans (Hill 2017). Similar stories have been found across the country; this essay, however, focuses on media coverage of bizarre stories from Nova Scotia as a manifestation of a particular form of regional representation. Such stories might be considered a contemporary manifestation of the provincial “Folk” - albeit one that is presented through a digital medium that creates opportunities for producers and consumers to enter into conversation about the style, context, and meaning of such representations through social media platforms. This essay recounts a number of “bizarre” news reports from Nova Scotia, and the reactions to them on social media, as a means of exploring the fruitfulness of a digital history approach to regionalism and the “Folk.” The essay is exploratory, offering some tentative conclusions at the end, but is largely concerned with making a connection between media studies of what has been called “convergence culture” and more traditional studies of Atlantic Canadian society and culture.

¹ The levity of these stories also tends to distract from a number of much darker stories coming from Nova Scotia in recent years, including, for instance, the murder of Raymond Taavel, the attack on Scott Jones, Rehteah Parsons’ suicide, and the cross burning in Windsor. These stories reveal serious tensions in the province around gender and ethnicity that are not dealt with in this paper, but clearly point to complications with the Folk image.

The stories

The media stories run the gamut from mildly unusual to thoroughly bizarre – a term marshaled here intentionally to highlight the extent to which it is used to describe Nova Scotians and Nova Scotia-based occurrences. In March 2015, *Metro Halifax* reported on a “bizarre” biting incident that resulted in a local groom spending the night in the Halifax jail. The man and his new wife – both still in their wedding attire – were celebrating at a New Minas bar when the man became involved in an imbroglio with another local woman and – according to the published story - proceeded to bite her on the face. The Crown attorney described the incident as a “bizarre assault,” with the presiding judge likewise highlighting the “element of bizarreness” inherent to the story (Starratt 2015). The term was used again to describe a January 2015 altercation between Nova Scotia Liberal MLA Andrew Younger and a municipal clerk, who allegedly bit Younger and tore his jacket while meeting at Sir Sandford Fleming Park in Halifax (Bruce and Gorman 2015).

Many articles also descend into pre-emptive apologetics for the apparent strangeness of the news coming out of Nova Scotia. “Even by Nova Scotia standards, this sitting of the Nova Scotia legislature has been a weird one,” begins an article detailing recent political scandals involving secret recordings, nepotism, and the unethical leaking of MLA medical information (Laroche 2015). BuzzFeed’s piece from February 2016, “30 Strange Things That Could Only Happen In Nova Scotia,” similarly presents the province as unique in its strangeness. The article comprises a list of events, including a squirrel blamed for disrupting the electricity to thousands of Nova Scotia Power customers, the opening of an “S&M B&B” in Stellarton, and the massive success of a Jamie Oliver knife give-away arranged by the Sobey’s grocery chain (Silverman 2016).

While many articles deal with events from Halifax and the surrounding area, the stories involving Cape Breton are sometimes imbued with a particularly glaring dimension of class condescension. One viral video, posted as “Cape Breton Redneck loses it on snowplow,” found international coverage – with the CBC drafting an article titled, “Only in Cape Breton? ‘Redneck snowplow’ cleans up the streets.” This article reports that while “a [convertible] 2000 Grand Prix may not be the vehicle of choice for most commercial snowplows,

the driver doesn't seem to have much trouble maneuvering snowy streets in the two-wheel drive" ("Cape Breton" 2016). Similar coverage was afforded in recent years to another viral video of a moose in the Cape Breton Highlands, wherein the nearby residents are heard to speak in thick regional dialects (Mills 2012), as well as the news stories surrounding the appearance of a Christ-image on the wall of the Bras d'Or Tim Hortons (Bradley 2016).

One such tale begins with the heist of an Old Dutch potato chip delivery truck from Middleton in early January 2016. "It could have been random or someone with a chip on their shoulder," describes the newspaper piece (Fairclough 2016). Nearly a dozen articles described a Halifax man who was caught red-handed while grilling a stolen rack of ribs on the backyard barbeque of an unsuspecting homeowner. The news media, as well as the spokesperson for the Halifax Regional Police, made ample use of humour in describing the incident: the young man was a "carnivorous culprit" who attempted "an ill-advised culinary plot." The police were said to have "dished out" multiple charges for "being a bad thief and an even worse cook." Brian Palmetter, the police spokesman, stated, "we should throw the cookbook at him because he ruined a perfectly good rack of ribs", and that while the homeowner was able to put the fire out, "the meal was a total loss" (Brennan 2011).

The above examples are a selection of the type of stories considered emblematic of the "Nova Scotia bizarre." In any other circumstance, they might seem unremarkable. Considering the repeated language found within – especially that which signifies either deprecating humour or the appeal-to-incomprehension – it becomes clear that such representations are part of a larger narrative about "insider" and "outsider" framing of Nova Scotia and its residents.

Class and the Folk

Such representations are not simply stereotypes developed for consumption by the extra-provincial "Other." Indeed, there is a sense that such ascriptions are often embraced – both ironically and un-ironically – as constituent pieces of Nova Scotian provincial identity. John McCullough, writing of the response to the ostensibly classist and stereotypical representation of the province found within television programs such as *Gullage's* and *Trailer Park Boys*, addresses this possibility directly. He describes:

It would be unfair and inaccurate to leave the impression that [such representations] . . . serve only to normalize poverty and social devolution in the context of globalization by trading in excessive humanist sentiment. In their own ways, it has to be said that [these stories] are also pregnant with the progressive possibilities of cultural production that is recognizably locally made and politically resistant (McCullough 2009: 166).

The same might be said of the ways in which some Nova Scotia social media users have responded to stories that position them within the regional stereotype.

When examined holistically, commonalities soon become visible within each of the stories herein. Utilizing the lens put forward by recent works of regional literary criticism, these pieces appear to uphold Peter Thompson's contention that "Canada's East Coast has been, like every other place in the world, reshaped by globalization, the expansion of consumer culture, and an increasingly neo-liberal climate – all of which seem to counteract received ideas about the region" (Thompson 2012: 244). Hence, we see an outsized focus on contemporary concerns about consumerism, modernity, and even popular culture. Food-related stories are especially popular fodder for the Nova Scotia bizarre, such as the Old Dutch potato chip delivery truck theft in Middleton and the Halifax rib thief. Food-lore and the relationship between culinary culture, humour, and representation are common – and here such practices are directly applied to the region. For decades, urban legends have helped to illustrate our emotional attachment to the gastronomic – from American fears over the "Kentucky Fried Rat" to the semi-annual panic that emerges over supposed razorblades in Halloween candy (Brunvand 2002).

In Canada, there is unlikely to be another chain as firmly wedded to the saccharine romanticism of an idealized national identity as Tim Hortons. Steven Penfold has effectively interrogated these intersections in his *The Donut: A Canadian History*. He writes,

Canadians did not invent the donut folklore so much as they added the donut to existing ways of seeing their communities: Canada as a northern country, hockey as a national sport, America as an imagined other . . . Much of donut folklore played on irony and absence, poking fun at the unsophisticated hinterland and the pretentious metropolis, half-jokingly

recognizing that few things united Canadians besides a coffee and donut, and that places like Hamilton and St Catharines lacked culture but made up for it with lunch bucket charm (Penfold 2008, 188).

If Andrew Wernick (1993, 297) is correct that “Canadian consciousness . . . knows itself to be rooted in the dull daily experience of living in a peripheralized region in which nothing really happens,” then what more can such media representations – replete with humour and appeals to incomprehension – tell us about the ways that Nova Scotians are perceived? While “bizarre” Tim Hortons stories emerge from across the country, these and the other story examples that are described above tap into established tropes, stereotypes, and beliefs about life in Nova Scotia.

Class plays an important, albeit under-examined, role in the presentation of such stories. While not ubiquitous, many of these stories contain working-class protagonists who conform to particular class-based stereotypes of the observer who regards them through a media lens. In the Atlantic Canadian context, the choice of leg-coverings by a jean-clad Newfoundland boy is integral to the “bizarre” nature of the story - and is also deeply rooted in the class history of denim jeans. Jeans, of course, have long been a symbol of working-class masculinity. Although gaining a broader appeal after the 1930s, the pants have remained a symbolic representation of the idealized, broad-shouldered, industrial working-class men that are found throughout American popular culture (Comstock 2011). Indeed, jeans as a symbol of social class have expanded beyond the borders of North America to influence youth fashion culture throughout Europe and Asia (Ege 2011). In this sense, a story of a boy in blue jeans having his medal stripped away contains undertones of class-conflict within institutionalized, organized sporting competitions.

Even more obvious examples of the media conflation between the regional, the provincial, and low-brow, working-class culture are the references to the “Cape Breton redneck.” Redneck culture and its various iterations and representations have been fodder for extensive scholarly examination. In the United States, representational stereotypes of white Southerners as “rednecks” or “hillbillies” have been – at different times and in different ways – both condemned and accepted by those on the receiving end. As Matthew Ferrence writes in *All American Redneck*, “At its deepest core, the ideological Redneck . . .

relies on an artificial notion of Southernness and rural whiteness that creates a phantasmagoric Redneck icon. Within this constructed image, the real identity conditions of people of the South and Appalachia [regardless of *actually existing* social class] are consumed by an exaggerated popular culture vision of the redneck” (2014, 8). Others wear the term, and appropriate the associated stereotypes, as a badge of honour – albeit one that is often rooted directly in the hierarchical position afforded to its bearers by the racial dominance of “whiteness” (Harkins 2004, 42). Jonathan Vance (2016), threading the needle, extolls the virtues of “hillbilly” identity while simultaneously condemning those he left behind in Appalachia (after leaving for Yale Law School) for their regressive culture and self-pity. Or, as *Jacobin* reviewer Bob Hutton (2016) puts it, “Vance’s personal story permits him to claim the term hillbilly, then scold his fellow hillbillies for their cultural and moral failings.”

Framing Theory and Convergence Culture

In order to understand the reasons why stories about the Nova Scotia bizarre are presented in this way, it is important to understand the literature surrounding media framing and journalistic representational forms. A frame in any given communication is used to promote a particular interpretation of a political issue or event (Chong and Druckman 2007, 106). It is a way of organizing one’s thoughts or attitudes towards an issue, and especially of pushing this attitude onto an audience, that they might also come to share the same opinion. Mainstream media have as their primary objective the goal of getting audiences to *see* like the media, “*as if this media gaze was untouched by bias or perspective*” (Fleras 2011, ix). All news stories employ a particular frame, depending on what the journalist or editor wishes the audience to believe. The theory of media framing is rooted in sociologist Erving Goffman’s idea of “frame analysis”, which captures the feeling of a person attempting to provide a “definition of the situation”, of the attempt to make sense of their role within any given social situation. Frame analysis further refers to the person’s idiosyncratic organization of their experience through an interpretive lens they understand to be appropriate, whether consciously or not (Goffman 1974, 11). In the case of Nova Scotia, classist representations of the provincial Folk often serve as this particular lens, with individual news reports of bizarre people and acts contributing to the maintenance of this image.

According to Erin Tolley (2015, 15) “The media are not passive facilitators but instead help shape how we see the world around us.” Media outlets work to variously connect, shape, and mirror within the relationship between citizen and politics. They *connect* citizens to information about politics and the country generally, serving as one of the primary means by which we stay informed. They *shape* the stories that are seen, acting as gatekeepers that “funnel the political universe into a limited selection of stories.” And they ostensibly work to *mirror* society to itself, although scholarship on media framing has clearly shown that this mirror is heavily distorted, reflecting a crafted version of reality. In short, news media do not simply go out and passively collect stories; they actively gather and transform nuggets of information into stories that they believe will sell the most effectively. At the end of the day, media outlets are businesses working to satisfy customers.

Agenda-setting has been most effectively analyzed in cases of framing race. Augie Fleras and Jean Lock Kunz (2001, vii) write that media constructions have “proven pivotal in shaping public consciousness over how social differences should be conceptualized or assessed.” Media “miscasting” of race has resulted in constructions of immigrants and minorities “as a threat to the status quo, a risk to national interests, inconsistent with core values and institutions, and inimical to a united and prosperous Canada” (Fleras and Kunz 2001, viii). The mass media in Canada has continued to cast minorities as a problem, framing stories about them in terms of controversy: “When not ignored as irrelevant or inferior, those demographics considered diverse and different are routinely framed as ‘troublesome constituents’ who constitute problems in their own right or who create problems involving cost or inconvenience” (Fleras 2011, viii). One recent example of this is found within an October 2017 interview with federal New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh, when CBC journalist Terry Milewski confronted Singh with a question about his perspective on the Air India bombing (Muzyka 2017). It seems unlikely that white Canadians would be similarly asked to weigh in on a decades-old crime to which their only relationship were the colour of their skin or their religion.

Many of the media representations of Nova Scotians that are examined within this article exhibit a similar bias against provincial residents, colouring them – in the meanwhile – with some fairly repugnant class-based stereotypes. In essence, Nova Scotians as a

whole – and Cape Bretoners in particular - are presented as purveyors of “low” or working-class culture, whereas extra-regional onlookers are the neutral, disinterested observer. It is “Othering” in action, in the most visible sense. Mass media has an especially important impact on how people think about poverty, wealth, and class relationships. Newspaper articles and television entertainment programs in particular are largely responsible for the construction of “myths and negative stereotypes about the working class and the poor [which] create a reality that seemingly justifies the superior positions of the upper-middle and upper classes and establishes them as entitled to their privileged position in the stratification system” (Kendall 2005, 2-3).

Diana Kendall argues that news media hold the ownership classes in awe, subtly shaping their audience to do the same, whereas they portray poor, precariously employed, or homeless populations as “in need of our pity or, at worst, as doomed by their own shortcomings” (2005, 4). The bizarre stories presented in recent accounts are frequently framed to depict Nova Scotians in just this way. The people and events are covered as odd, often rural and folksy, and very much doomed by their shortcomings. The common denominator is an issue of class difference and the way in which news media frame the working-classes.

The two most common ways used to frame these bizarre stories about Nova Scotia are through appeals to humour and incomprehension. Nearly all the featured stories make fun of the people depicted, through puns or through what is taken to be the inherent hilarity of the situation. One story insisted that funny street names in Porters Lake brought “hilarity and head-scratching,” assuming they would provide “excellent material for a Canadian sitcom.” In the story about the Parrsboro man in the coffee shop, police were quoted as saying that “[n]o employees or doughnuts were harmed during the incident”. Referring to the same story, a press release on the RCMP website itself described the incident as “double-double trouble”. The various versions of the rib thief story all include the police spokesman saying “the meal was a total loss”, as well as the other puns mentioned above. The neighbours of Stellarton’s infamous S&M B&B, on the other hand, refused to “submit” to the owner in the plans to re-open the business.

Several other stories were framed in terms of incomprehension. One involving the Legislature’s fall sitting describes

the period as especially “weird” and “strange”, appealing directly to “an ever incredulous” audience. The story about the roommates stabbing one another was also described as “bizarre” and “strange,” and BuzzFeed frequently headlines stories about Nova Scotia by specifically indicating that the “strange” things that followed could only happen in that province. An incident of a Bridgewater man riding drunk on his lawnmower was described as “unusual,” as was the Parrsboro Tim Horton’s break-in. The story of the Stellarton B&B was described as “unique,” and finally the story of the 100-car lineup at the Truro Tim Horton’s on Christmas Day was framed as “unreal”. All of this incredulity underpins a broader presentation of Nova Scotia as a place where strange people do strange things, incomprehensible to the outside observer.

Some of the stories also go one step further and include conspicuous quotes from witnesses who use language that evokes a folksy accent. A witness to the Truro Tim Horton’s lineup is quoted as describing how the employees get paid “right well”. The groom arrested for assault in New Minas was quoted as saying that the court had “lessened” the incident, leaving this wording ambiguous. Another video report of the story of the Halifax rib thief showed the victim – holding an alcoholic beverage – describing how he ran outside and found that “the meat, she was a’burnin’”. For the most part this language is subtle, but it is nevertheless effective in framing the story from the outset: the language of unusual or bizarre, as well as the puns and humorous quotes from police and witnesses, are always found directly in the story’s headline, or at the very beginning or end of the body of the text, serving to immediately frame what follows or to remind the reader of the wider context.

While framing theory provides insight into how these types of stories are constructed, there is one factor that has come to complicate this model. Since the advent of “Web 2.0” and social media, the theory of “convergence culture” has taken shape. This idea tackles the novel situation in which consumers of media have also become the primary producers of the very same media – what many now call “producers” (Bruns 2006). Facebook and Twitter are prime examples of this model, being online platforms on which users consume information that is primarily produced by other users just like themselves. As Bird (2011, 502) writes, Web 2.0 has enabled the emergence of a more interactive environment for consumers, “representing an entirely new way of seeing the media ‘audience.’” The change that the term “producer”

really implies is a new definition of “audience” and what it means to generate digital content – by and for whom? This change also implies a potential breakdown of existing hierarchies. As Gross has noted, prior to the advent of the internet, communication studies focused heavily on the role of television in “cultivating” attitudes and belief systems. Television viewership was a top-down, one-way model of communication, as audiences usually had no control over what kind of “cultural fare” was created. The proliferation of the internet has radically changed this model. The passive audience now comprises active users, who do have (limited) control over what kind of content they consume. Whereas television networks once searched for the largest mass audiences, digital media now targets their appeals to niche groups. Gross (2009, 67) concludes: “Even with the power law dictating that a miniscule fraction of “prosumers” ever reach an audience larger than their immediate circle, the top-down tyranny of the media has been effectively challenged.”

Methodology

The social media examples drawn upon in this paper are an examples of bottom-up challenges – or contributions to - media attempts to cultivate a Folk image of Nova Scotia. Users are frequently anonymous or pseudo-anonymous social media commenters on websites such as CBC.ca, Facebook and Twitter - whose accounts explicitly identify as Nova Scotian. Of these, only those who acted explicitly to comment or re-post information relating to the aforementioned bizarre news stories were included in our analysis. Most news sites maintain a web-based comments section which remain publicly available, while social media users produce their own content on the site in the form of tweets or comments (see Maragh 2016).

We first identified the “bizarre” stories featured in this article through traditional media. When such stories also included an online version, we collected a database of user comments. Additionally, we searched associated keywords on Facebook and Twitter using the sites’ analytics tools to get an idea of where each article has been re-posted or “re-Tweeted” and by whom. We narrowed the Twitter search further by including localized hashtags, which exist as a form of sorting that is imposed by the individual commenter. A person who re-posts the Cape Breton Redneck video to Twitter and uses the hashtag #CapeBreton, for instance, ensures that the Tweet will be visible to those searching for other #CapeBreton content. Posters and

commenters with publicly-available accounts were then examined to see whether or not the individual has self-identified as either living or working in Nova Scotia. In this way, we identified examples of self-selected commenters who publicized themselves as Nova Scotians and indicated a willingness to participate, publicly, in online conversations related to these particular forms of representation.

In addition to online searches for news coverage regarding Nova Scotia oddities in *Metro Halifax* and other digital media, the authors explored material copies of the *Chronicle Herald* and *Cape Breton Post*. After finding several examples from recent years, the authors searched through the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter using the sites' analytics tools to find comments and analysis relating to these stories. On Twitter, hashtag searches of #novascotia, #halifax, #nspoli, #capebreton, and #dartmouth were used to narrow the focus. Through this methodology, we have identified dozens of social media users who venture online to provide parallel and reactive commentary to the stories produced by traditional news media. These users are, in a sense, becoming cultural producers themselves and pushing back against essentializing Folk narratives that ascribe particular roles, values, and motifs to "bizarre" Nova Scotia.

There is no doubt that traditional news media – such as the CBC, *Chronicle Herald*, and *Metro News* – is paying attention to social media, and Twitter in particular. It has become commonplace for online news stories from traditional outlets to literally embed images of tweets within the story itself, including the user's "handle" and profile picture. For news media, capturing Twitter user comments is a way of affecting a greater sense of immediacy and participation. It is also a way of cutting costs and the time spent doing investigative work, as there are inevitably people on the ground at any given news-worthy event tweeting comments and pictures about it that can then be picked up later, for free (Heravi and Harrower 2016). "Journalism and social media," as Marcel Broersma and Todd Graham write, "have entered a convenient marriage" (2013, 446).

A New Kind of Cultural Producer

The social media users examined in our study complicate the straightforward definition of "cultural producer" that has traditionally underpinned the arguments of cultural critics. The idea of convergence culture describes how the power divide between traditional news

media and consumers is beginning to break down, with the latter taking on a very active production role (McGuinness 2016). Social media users in Nova Scotia are speaking back to news media by providing responses and commentary on their stories. While generally their role in the media landscape – and the ability to sway public opinion – is quite small, there are examples that demonstrate the power of social media to affect change.

One such example was the online backlash the Mic Mac Mall in Dartmouth experienced after unveiling its new ad campaign. The ads featured drawings of stick-figure thin women holding shopping bags, with taglines like “My favourite class? Shop!” “Social studies? Does posting my new boots on Facebook count?” and “Mixing patterns – now that’s a science!”. The ads were criticized online as sexist and naive, and the mall actually pulled them from circulation and apologized for offending customers. A CBC article explicitly attributed this decision to the “[m]any people on social media [who] expressed outrage over the ads”, and embedded within the article no less than thirteen related tweets (“Mic Mac Mall” 2013).

In other cases, the impact of Twitter commentary may be less clear. Many were outraged when the Halifax Regional Municipality unveiled its new branding, which consisted of the word “Halifax” in two shades of blue, and the tagline “Be Bold” (“Halifax Regional Municipality” 2014). Global News embedded several tweets about the issue (Lau 2014), and others were found online: @joanne_omstudio tweeted “that’s god damn pitiful if you ask me. My cat could have done a better job” (Chilton 2014), whereas @robertsnell later offered: “[t]he “Halifax branding issue” doesn’t exist and politicians at @hfxgov need to stop pissing away tax dollars on stupid shit” (Snell 2016). Before the commenting feature was disabled, a total of 164 comments were posted on the CBC article about the unveiling. For instance, the user “Ancestry Hanson” commented, “What a piece of crap. The emperor isn’t wearing any clothes. What person thinks this is a logo? Someone better take off the rose coloured glasses and face reality. Haligonians should have a say in this.” The point was underscored by “Tsymkrad,” who added, “Halifax city council described the logo itself as “bold”, but the only thing bold about that logo is the level of bold audacity it takes to spend that much money on such a simple, cosmetic graphic.” In another interaction, “MikeMcK” writes, “I’m OK with the \$200K price tag as long as they throw in a bag of magic beans,” to which

“shoredude” replies, “I think the Council members may have eaten those already – before the vote it seems” (“Here’s Halifax’s” 2014).

Despite the online outrage, the municipality did not pull the new branding like the Mic Mac Mall, likely due to the cost (over \$300,000). This does not necessarily imply, however, that producers online had no impact. One recent study suggests that “only one in every hundred people will be active online content producers, with 10 ‘interacting’ by commenting, and the remaining 89 simply viewing” (Bird 2011, 504). These numbers give an indication of just how few people might be termed actual “producers” based on their level of participation, and serve to contextualize the numbers of people commenting on bizarre stories and especially that while many may not be actively commenting, they are clearly reading the differing viewpoints.

In the case of the biting in the New Minas bar, we conducted searches of public Facebook posts using the terms “bizarre+biting+New Minas+groom.” The article was posted twice publicly, with one of the postings including a chain of comments from sixteen distinct Nova Scotia-based users. On Twitter, it was shared more frequently – 10 times between 13 and 17 March 2015, but did not prompt the same level of engagement. While this article was not “viral” in the same sense as many of the other stories, it is particularly interesting in that one of the people who was directly involved turned to social media as a way to respond to their characterization. The bride in the story, named in the article but unnamed here for the sake of privacy, offered an alternative reading of the night’s events on a public Facebook page that had shared the article:

[The groom] was smashed in the face with the side of her head and his piercing hit her neck and left a mark. He did not bite her! My husband may have had a rough past but that was due to a rough upbringing. Since we met in 2008 he has not been in trouble with the law and has completely turned his life around . . . I am extremely annoyed that people are so quick to make opinions just based on what some reporter wrote (“J.H.” 2015).

Clearly, for this woman, social media offered an opportunity to democratize the narrative account of the ‘biting’ event that was produced by traditional media. Whatever the actual facts of the case, this is evidence that some Nova Scotians are turning to these forms in

an attempt to problematize their representation as “bizarre” and add their own accounts of the events depicted.

A variety of comments and Tweets also exist for the other stories. In the case of Cape Breton’s “redneck” snowplow, the CBC story was shared dozens of times across platforms and received more than 1 million unique views from around the world. Web-based comments on the CBC website were largely anonymous, with one user explicitly questioning the use of the term redneck. Others invoked the image of the Trailer Park Boys, with “BishopvilleRed” remarking: “Always good to know the streets of Sunnyvale trailer park are clear.” This was also a motif that was common throughout Facebook commentary, with more than a dozen users drawing the comparison to the popular television program across a variety of posts. Twitter, again, includes nearly a dozen public shares of the story – but fostered far fewer comments and discussion than either the web-based CBC comment section or the variety of Facebook pages that shared the story.

The story about the sale of Jamie Oliver knives was roundly lampooned across platforms. According to a CBC reader identified only as Sebastian Leblanc, “At least the criminals will have quality knives for their attacks.” FreeSpeechDisallowed responded, “Free knives. This is a great way to ensure that Halifax maintains it’s [sic] reputation as the stabbing capital of Canada,” to which KeithP replied, “Dartmouth, actually. They have been out of stock there for weeks.” The same user also commented on the story of the “weird” fall Legislature sitting by saying, “Everything about NS politics is weird. It’s like trying to drive a car with an empty gas tank and 3 steering wheels.”

The treatment of all of these stories across social media reveals the ways in which Web 2.0 has given Nova Scotia residents a platform from which they may voice their opinions about matters local or global, and specifically to speak about the ways that they are represented in media. If the level of activity or influence of those on social media has not yet reached the point where they can effect substantial change in the way news reporting is framed, then they have certainly taken the first step in infiltrating the way in which news information is gathered. Tweets embedded within news stories and the ability for anyone to leave comments on an article for all to read are evidence of the breakdown of the old divide between producer and consumer. News media actively encourages its readers to provide

commentary on its stories, and to read others' comments, making it a part of the overall experience. It is this breakdown of roles that has come to complicate the picture of cultural producers and the maintenance of the established trope of the Nova Scotia Folk.

While the qualitative study of these examples of the Nova Scotia bizarre is not as comprehensive as will perhaps soon be possible through the development of digital humanities tools and other aggregators, the authors' believe that such tools and methodologies can help to underpin a broader argument about how we might read online and social media activity as particular forms of cultural production. The comment sections of news articles and social media sites are frequently decried as the staging-ground for baseless complaints or reactionary posturing. However, in narrowing our focus to specific types of comments about particular topics about the province and its people, it is possible to get an idea of how these stories are being received, digested, and re-articulated by those who are directly implicated or depicted. We believe that these forms of cultural production should not be simply discounted, but taken seriously as a form of agency on behalf of those who are represented.

This analysis supports Greg Marquis's argument that there was always a countervailing discourse of modernity in the province, expressed through certain forms of the media, business, and politics (2005, 145). In this version, Nova Scotia was *not* portrayed as an antimodern backwater, but a place as modern and globalized as any other. The comments on news stories and social media highlighted in this article are an example of this expression of modernity – this countervailing discourse – in the face of anti-modern or Folk-based representations. However, Herb Wylie also writes, in *Anne of Tim Hortons*, that the irony of the antimodern image is that the region has embraced it “as part of a thoroughly *modern* campaign to diversify economically and generate revenue” (2011, 22). He says that while many resist the image of the Folk, many have also reinforced it by emphasizing certain aspects of it, such as independence, cultural vitality, and communal cohesion. This ironic situation is strongly evident in the case of the television show *Trailer Park Boys*, which depicts, in Peter Thompson's words, “outlandishly stereotypical images of trailer park life” and Nova Scotian culture generally. Thompson notes that reviews of the show have been mixed for exactly this reason. Some have spoken out against the portrayal of such antimodern tropes, whereas others have praised it as “an ironic take

on the most extreme versions of the region's culture" (Thompson 2015, 182-183). While such debates have raged, the show has become internationally successful, using the Folk image to its very modern financial benefit.

Conclusion

The social media commenters that we examined in the stories relating to the Nova Scotia bizarre are cultural producers of a kind. Their interactions with media representations are frequently discordant; there exists both revulsion and attraction in their responses. The Cape Breton Redneck, for many, is to be lauded for his ingenuity – but there is also danger that he will be used to caricature residents of the economically depleted Island. Social media users are content to laugh at themselves, but bristle when they believe such humour is at their expense for the consumption of outsiders. In another context, Steven Shapin (2010, 34) has referred to this practice as the intellectual or moral right or credibility to make statements about or to laugh at one's own community. When outside groups, or "Come From Aways" in Nova Scotia parlance, attempt to access these forms of humour, they are often stymied by the internal closing-of-ranks or cultural protectionism that frequently rests upon claims of authenticity. Indeed, this protectionism was so widely known that it became the subject of debate at the 2008 Liberal Party Annual General Meeting. Recognizing that immigration to the province was necessary for its continued economic and cultural development, the Party passed a resolution that recognized the "hurtful" and unwelcoming nature of the term "come from away," and promised to "refrain from using the term CFA to label newcomers and instead adopt the new CFA that we welcome citizens who "come from anywhere" ("Policy Development" 2008).

There is a great irony in this. Responses to the Nova Scotia bizarre reveal the same tension between embracing aspects of representational forms while rejecting others that Ian McKay first postulated in *Quest of the Folk*. In their social media comments, these Nova Scotians reveal both an acceptance of and a distance from a set of narratives that frequently presents them as Other. In a sense, social media offers an opportunity for residents in places such as Nova Scotia to take control of their own representation by interrogating their constructions. The New Minas bride, discontent with her representation as the clueless wife of a rowdy husband, used the

platform to present facts of the case that she felt were missing from the official account. This and other clarifying comments on social media are frequently used to assert control of representation and attack aspects of narrative control that do not fit with local perceptions or perspectives.

The aim of this essay was to point out the fruitfulness for studies of the Folk in paying attention to how Nova Scotians now interact online with news reports about their province. The use of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have enabled new kinds of engagement with provincial stereotypes, and these digital tools also provide an opportunity for scholars to make sense of how these ideas are rapidly changing. Nevertheless, we also suggest that, despite the need to adapt the definition of cultural producer to meet these changes, there remains in studies of the Folk a need to address class structure as a key animating factor. Whatever new forms of engagement social media and convergence culture has allowed, class differences clearly still underpin representations of Nova Scotia, from within and without.² News stories about “bizarre” people and incidents in Nova Scotia, shared widely online, are still very much about creating distance and solidifying old ideas – digital tools, it appears, are giving residents an opportunity to challenge these constructions in real-time.

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² And, again, as cases like Raymond Taavel, Scott Jones, and Rehteah Parsons illustrate, gender and ethnicity also play significant roles in how Nova Scotians understand each other, and serve to further complicate these stereotypes.

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