

Professional Analysis

Images of The Faroe Islands

In a remote stretch of the North Atlantic ocean, approximately equidistant from Scotland, Iceland and Norway, are the tiny Faroe Islands – home to 50,000 people with their own language, national identity, and a vibrant modern society. Despite their small size, the Faroes function as a fully autonomous nation within the Kingdom of Denmark.

When the islands are portrayed in the international media, they usually take one of two forms: an idyllic, tradition-bound natural paradise... or a barbaric backwater stained red with the blood of slaughtered pilot whales. The islands, however, are rarely covered in a balanced way that seems relatable and authentic to modern Faroese. The modern story of the islands seems at first glance full of contradictions – turf roofs sheltering homes with the latest high-speed internet and satellite television; fridges packed with frozen pizzas and sheds still stocked with mutton, dried fish and salted blubber; a society that functions as both a small community and an entire nation. Many Faroese feel that their representation in the media is cropped by strict frames and narratives that go for the exotic and the dramatic at the expense of authentic portrayals of this complexity.

In many ways, the Faroe Islands serves as an example of many small nations throughout Europe and the world whose cultures and societies are often marginalized, misunderstood and misrepresented. The media's role in portraying these cultures should be to shed light on the reality of their modern situations while remaining sensitive to authenticity. Unfortunately, several factors leads to the media resorting to well-worn frames. Every form of media has its agenda and its inherent biases, and the representation of the Faroes that results leaves a lot to be desired: a well-rounded representation of daily life.

“Glansbilleder are always pretty...”

Johan Petur Dam, a 32-year-old Faroe Islander who watches a lot of foreign media and documentaries about his nation, groups the coverage into two categories – “the very positive ones” and

the very negative ones – without much in between. He says some visitors describe the Faroes as a sort of paradise. “It's almost ridiculous how positively they talk about it.” he says, “and sometimes it translates into media as well. Like *National Geographic* making the Faroes the best place to travel in... what was it, 2007? People are still talking about it.”

The tourism industry, naturally, has a positive bias. Travel writers and tourism officials seek primarily to market the islands as a vacation destination – which can result in a overly simple and idyllic portrayal focused on certain aspects of Faroese nature and traditional culture. Súsanna Sørensen, the press officer for Visit Faroe Islands, explains that while her office strives to present a balanced, accurate, and layered vision of the Faroes, simple messages work better in marketing, and the ultimate goal is to get people to come to the Faroes to experience it themselves. “Painting that picture of the unspoiled gem in the middle of the ocean,” she says, “is fine for tourism purposes.” But even she believes that this depiction can be updated, as the country has more to offer visitors than blue skies and green mountains – food and music are among several areas of growing touristic interest.

Uni Johannesen, 21, says some Faroese refer to the idealized tourism pictures they see of the Faroe Islands as “glansbilleder” because they resemble the sort of overly precious imagery seen on stickers and paper dolls. “*Glansbilleder* are always pretty, you see... and perfect.”

“We see so often pictures of the Faroe Islands with sunshine, and clear skies, and that doesn't happen so often actually,” says Heri Olsen, 58. In reality, the Faroes are one of the cloudiest places on earth; rain and fog – often so severe that helicopters and boats can't travel – are far more common weather forecasts than the sunshine that often fills the brochures.

Matthew Workman, an American journalist who has spent the last several years working on The Faroe Islands Podcast, first became interested when he noticed his blog had a visitor from the islands, which he had never heard of. As he did some research, he found himself one of the outsiders who has been completely taken by the beauty and exotic strangeness of the country, which he says “just kind of spoke to me.”

Workman says it is understandable that “almost every article says something about 'the staggering austere landscapes of this windswept land' and there's always talk of the mountains and the fjords and... how can you not? It looks like Lord of the Rings over there.” While he agrees that “there is

something sort of mysterious and wondrous about the place,” he also thinks that most depictions of the Faroes are overly simplistic for better or for worse, ignoring a lot of the nuance and complexity.

Cultural depictions likewise tend to focus on a single slice of the Faroese reality. Nineteen-year-old Elinborg á Tjaldráfløtti Olsen says pictures of the abandoned farm at Saksun, for example, “could have been taken in the seventeen-hundreds... eighteen-hundreds... it's like nothing has changed. It's unspoiled. It's pretty.”

Johannesen said that he only remembers a few media pieces that really represented the lives of ordinary people in the Faroes. One was a photo essay, shot in the off-season, comprising pictures of normal houses, idle children, and religious activities. Johannesen appreciated the series. He said, “it was interesting to see. It was different than just like nature and more nature, and the occasional 'Viking Boat,' Faroese rowing boats and turf-roof houses ... I didn't really think it looked that sad. They were a good depiction of the lonesomeness and isolation that I can relate to here.”

Some of his friends disagreed. The headline of the piece spoke of a lack of possibility, and one of his friends said she thought that the series sent a horrible image of the Faroe Islands. But he said, “Isn't it also bad, or wrong, to send out just the best pictures we can? What is there of possibility in picture-perfect images?”

“The sea is red, and it makes everyone see red...”

Despite all the positive attention the Faroe Islands receive in the media, a foreigner is more likely to have heard about the grindadráp, or whale killing. The Faroese have hunted and eaten pilot whales for more than a thousand years, and continue to do so today despite outcry from anti-whaling organizations such as Greenpeace and the splinter group Sea Shepherd. Sea Shepherd has driven a lot of attention to the Faroes by disseminating viral images and forwards about the slaughter, attracting media attention to their protests and 'direct action' activism, and even filming a Discovery Networks TV series, Whale Wars, in the islands.

“They go back to (the whale killing) all the time,” says Olsen. “There we are often represented as barbaric monsters, worse than animals ... It must be a really strange impression of how we are here.

And I understand well what they think. Because they haven't seen anything else.”

When pilot whales are killed in the shallow Faroese sea, their blood turns the water bright red, which makes for a striking image. “The sea is red, and it makes everyone see red, too” says Dam. “I mean, taking the whole, whether it's correct, or proper, or healthy to even do this, I mean... well, that's another discussion. But seeing a picture like this, I can understand the furor from people who see this.”

Sørensen says that they are “obviously unhappy” that whaling is so visible in Google results about the Faroes, dominating other aspects, but that she is happy that it doesn't seem to have influenced the portrayal of the Faroese in mainstream media. “We can see that there is a lot of noise on the social media, but it doesn't really get into the established media.”

Most available descriptions of the grind are filled with factual inaccuracies. Some reflect outdated information, while others appear to contain mistakes or intentional misinformation. Commonly, the grind is described as a kind of festival or coming-of-age ceremony, from which the meat is not used, but simply thrown away or left to rot. Sea Shepherd's releases often contain misspellings and factual mistakes, and their Whale Wars program shows the same disregard for facts both polemic and mundane – once labeling Lerwick, the capital of the Shetlands, as the Faroese capital Tórshavn.

“I guess some people look at (the propaganda) and they think, “OMG, why are you killing these animals? Why do you need to kill them?” says Jóna Venned, 24, “Because a lot of people think that meat comes from the supermarket. I guess they don't know that we actually use the meat to eat, and that it's an organized kill. It's not just a massacre, as some would call it.”

The anti-whaling media usually does not come from reputable journalists, but from activists with a clear agenda. Workman says that groups like Sea Shepherd “are not actually interested in portraying anything accurately. They're interested in forwarding their specific cause, and they've enlisted the Faroese as unpaid extras in their little morality play.”

Ed Ou, a Canadian journalist, came to the Faroe Islands in summer/fall 2014 to shoot a documentary about the grindadráp for Vice News. He says that he is trying to look at the grindadráp from an objective journalistic stance. His documentary may be one of the first to do so. When he was reading up about the issue, Ou said, “there was such an absence of information, at least in mainstream

traditional sources. You would read all of these stories that were single source, just Sea Shepherd or Greenpeace dictating the story to outlets that were too lazy to send someone or do their own research.”

Ou says that the grindadráp occupies a lot of space in the public consciousness despite being a somewhat rare and non-representational occurrence in Faroese life. When a place becomes defined by certain conflicts and ideas, it can be hard for a journalist to cover anything else. Ou has also done a lot of work in the Middle East, and frequently has to find a way to connect his stories to larger terrorism and war narratives, even when there are many other interesting stories to tell about the region.

“I wanted to go to the Faroes to show the culture,” Ou says. “But of course for any editor in New York, I have to hook it to the whale hunt, because otherwise, why would they send you? It's a battle. I'd rather go there hooking it on something that's pretty done to death, but still go there and do something slightly different than not go there at all.”

“In depicting the Faroe Islands, the media often goes back in time...”

The common thread found in almost all depictions of the Faroe Islands – travel pieces, anti-whaling propaganda, and news coverage alike – is a predilection for the exotic and traditional. A focus on the past, or on tiny villages and islands where only a small percentage of Faroese live today, often yields an out-of-date and misleading picture of Faroese life.

One explanation for this bias is easy to understand. Usually differences, rather than similarities, with the rest of the modern world are what most excite the foreign imagination and bring international attention to this out-of-the-way place. In addition to the drama and controversy of the grindadráp, there is the historical romance of ancient ballads and ring-dance, the plights of small villages that lose population year by year, the exoticism of life on an isolated island – all easier to sell than the modern reality of most Faroese lives.

Á Tjaldrafløtti Olsen has grown up in Klaksvík, the second largest town in the Faroes, and says she often can't relate to what she sees about the Faroes in the international media.

“Of course there are small villages,” she says, “but most people live or work in like the big cities where there actually is a store, and, like, a gas station. And they don't really show that ... because it reminds them too much of the normal... of ordinary cities that have been modernized ... Like, it

wouldn't be fun taking a picture in Klaksvík of people drinking Red Bull. That's not what we're attracted towards. So obviously they're going to go to houses with grass on it and do something, something that they aren't familiar with. I get that.”

Sørensen says the media is often interested in covering the extremes. She frequently sends journalists to meet the family that lives alone on the remote island of Dímun, and to the 17th generation farm in Kirkjubøur. Although she tries to balance these stories by always matching them with something in Tórshavn so that the visitors get the full perspective of life on the islands, she understands that these outliers are what “people find fascinating, and therefore very often take pictures of. It's those pictures that we have as well, because it's those pictures that people want. So it's sort of this circle, and how do we show the modern side as well?”

While they understand the reasoning, many Faroese believe that the result of this exotic coverage is that foreigners have the wrong idea about how life is throughout the nation. “One doesn't see the modern... the computers and so on,” says Elin Hansen, 63, “They think certainly that we all walk everywhere and catch puffins and when we are hungry, go down to fish by the shore. Or kill a sheep.”

“In depicting the Faroe Islands, the media often goes back in time,” says Johanna á Tjaldrafløtti, 51, “For example, there are the programs about the tunnel to Gásadalur, and the old Faroese – so birds, and sheep, and Faroese dance, and... and one forgets perhaps to depict the Faroe Islands as they are right now. What are the young people doing? What do they do in the town? And what is it like on the weekends? Maybe in Klaksvík or in Tórshavn? Or what is the daily life like in a normal family?”

“We're these Viking descendants that speak a language that is almost like the viking language, that's the classic,” says Dam. “And the controversial stuff, like we are still killing whales. Those are staples that are always in all documentaries about the Faroes. So seeing one that doesn't mention these is really, really fun sometimes.”

Olsen has a different feeling about how the media handles modernity in the Faroes. Instead of just ignoring it, he finds that “the Faroe Islands are depicted as a mixture of an ancient society which is hypermodern at the same time. They write very often about, yeah yeah yeah, about the sheep and the grind and that we have lived here and we have this language and so on, but at the same time they often

add that it is a hypermodern fishing nation for example. And it is possible to fly, and we have roads, and we have tunnels, and we live in houses, and so it is.”

But Olsen went on to add that, “of course one also sees strange depictions of the Faroe Islands, with old houses, and men with Faroese hats, and you know, things that aren't really true.” He says that the coverage of the Faroe Islands in Scandinavian newspapers has remained very stagnant for a long time. “If you read the articles that were written twenty years, or thirty years ago, and articles that were written yesterday, by a Danish journalist in a Danish newspaper, I don't believe it has changed very much,” he says. “Yes, even though (the Faroe Islands) have changed a lot. If one has a preconceived notion of what it is, that is what you're going to keep seeing.”

“Oh wow, did you know there's such a thing as the Faroe Islands?”

Even news stories that would seem straightforward and modern often frame the Faroe Islands in an exotic way. The interest of a small island nation sometimes takes over other interesting angles on Faroese issues, constraining them once again into the same stereotypes. Because the Faroes aren't well known, they can and sometimes do get away with gross factual errors. This is perhaps most noticeable in Danish and occasionally other European media, who sometimes cover the Faroes in normal news or culture stories that still often focus on the exotic, spend a lot of time establishing a place they assume you have never heard of, and rely on stereotypes – for example, stories about football (there is a Faroese team in FIFA), fishing disputes, Faroese artists, and local concerns or events in the Faroes.

Workman says, “one of the two biggest drivers of media attention is any time the national football team plays some other country. It... you know, whatever country it is is like, “Oh wow, did you know there's such a thing as the Faroe Islands? Do you know our team is going over there to some weird field to play a bunch of schoolteachers and auto mechanics?”

Venned remembers a football match that took place between the German and Faroese teams on a Wednesday night in Tórshavn. The bars closed at midnight, and the German media wrote a lot about that. “So a lot of Germans just thought that actually we didn't have any beer and that it was just really boring, a boring country,” she says, “but of course that was just a weird, weird view, because it was a normal Wednesday, so that would probably also happen somewhere else, but they just made a big deal

out of it in Germany.”

The view of the Faroes coming out of mainland Europe, particularly Denmark, tends to carry a more or less subtle air of condescension. Workman says that what he often hears from Danes and some other Europeans is that they think of the Faroese as “what we would call a hillbilly in the US, that sort of unsophisticated rural type.”

Danes often see the Faroes society as old-fashioned and conservative. Compared to the mainland European culture, it does have those tendencies – Denmark is very progressive in terms of social issues, whereas, as many Faroese told me, the islands are more religious and tend to lag behind on hot topics like gay rights or gender equality. “We are western Europe, but in many ways we are still 20 years behind,” says Dam. But the media often portrays them as being farther behind than they are.

In late 2013, the Danish public network DR TV made a documentary, 'Kvindeflugt fra Færoerne', or “Women fleeing the Faroe Islands.” The documentary was widely viewed in the Faroes and generated quite a bit of controversy from those who thought it was biased or atmospherically inaccurate. Faroese broadcasting network Kringvarp Føroya reported at the time that the documentary “has been under harsh criticism by Faroe Islanders, who don't recognize themselves in the picture it paints of the Faroese and the emigration problems. ” (1)

Although the documentary was nominally about the lack of women in the Faroes, the filmmakers spoke mostly to men, and the majority of the shots were scenes of sheep slaughter, small villages, and other images that are not a part of the daily life for the majority of Faroese today. Johanna á Tjaldrafløtti remembers it as a “strange picture” of the Faroes, representing the situation of a few as the general Faroese reality. She also said it failed to take into account the rapid cultural transformation that the larger towns in the Faroes have undergone in recent years, with many new cafes and other things for young people to do.

In an editorial from November 2013 in the Danish newspaper Information, 'Is it possible to drive to the Faroe Islands?' ('Kan man køre til Færøerne?') Bjørk K. Olsen critiqued the Kvindeflugt documentary and more general Danish stereotypes and ignorance about the Faroe islands. “What the viewer learns,” he writes, “is that the Faroese fish, slaughter sheep, import women from the Philippines, and there is one Faroese woman who would like to live in a big city... and the style is common in the

Danish media.”(2)

Sørensen says that 'Kvindeflugt' upset a lot of people, herself included. “It bothered me that they obviously came with an agenda,” she says. If they had contacted her, she says she could have introduced the journalists to a dozen interesting women who were choosing to stay or move back to the Faroe Islands, to balance the coverage. Instead, she feels like they went looking for remote parts of the country to make a statement on what they thought the Faroes were like, making it seem backwards. “They could have done the same on the west coast of Denmark if they wanted to. But it bothers me that they keep on looking for those stereotypes”

Depictions of the Faroe Islands are, for the most part, moving in the right direction. The Internet has helped to bring the whole world closer together, and Faroese people can now leave comments on articles, chat with foreigners online, or blog in order to help change perceptions of their islands directly. More journalists are coming to the Faroes and writing about a wider spectrum of topics, and the tourism industry is growing and broadening its appeal.

If coverage of the Faroes continues to increase, there should be enough room for good, realistic portrayals alongside the stereotypical ones. The VICE documentary about the grindadráp and other Faroese food issues will be coming out soon, and several other media pieces currently in the works are also aiming for a more realistic angle. Workman's Faroe Islands Podcast, which has released more than two hundred episodes since its creation in 2009, was also cited by several as a good source of English-language news and information about the Faroes.

The historic and continued stereotypical framing of the Faroe Islands is easier to explain than to resolve. Although the tourism industry may continue to improve and diversify its coverage, it will naturally continue to have a positive bias, while anti-whaling advocates, as long as they exist, will seek to negatively depict the grindadráp to advance their own cause. However, international journalism from Danish, European, and other outlets worldwide has itself not been immune to the strong pull of the exotic in Faroese narratives. Serious journalists should also do more to cover Faroese issues, and to do so in accurate and sensitive ways.

Naturally, exotic details are arresting and photogenic, ancient traditions and remote settlements lend themselves well to storytelling, and conflicts such as whaling and depopulation are easy to pitch

and frame along a dichotomy of old and new – but good journalism means finding the untold stories and rounding out the authentic picture.

The Faroe Islands are a unique and complex place that has changed enormously in recent years and continues to change. The Faroese cherish their history, their beautiful nature, and their villages greatly, but also emphasize that they are “normal people.” What they value most about their nation is the sense of community and familiarity, their language, their food, their music, their bright, festival-filled summers and long, dark winters. Despite all their special characteristics, the Faroese are ordinary people, first and last, and are moving into the future at – take a few antiquated social conventions and give a few high-tech undersea tunnels – the same speed as the rest of the world.

Those depicting the Faroes ought to keep this in mind and strive to craft more well-rounded portrayals of the Faroe Islands and the Faroese people.

1 – “hevur verið undir hørðum aþfinningum frá føroyingum, sum ikki kenna seg aftur í myndini, sendingin gav av føroyingum og trupulleikanum við fráflytingini.”

2 – “Overordnet set fik seeren at vide, at færinger fisker, slagter får, importerer kvinder fra Filippinerne, og at der findes én færøsk kvinde, der gerne vil bo i en storby... Og stilen er gennemgående i de danske medier.”