

Mayline Strouk

Governing Svalbard through research infrastructures

Abstract

At 78° north, the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard is home to a dozen research stations, several research laboratories, weather stations, satellite radars and an international university. In this territory covered by 60% by glaciers, there are more polar bears than people and there is no sunlight for half of the year. Yet, in 2020, thousands of scientists from 48 countries across all continents have been conducting research in Svalbard (Strouk, 2020). The Svalbard archipelago redefines what is doing science in the poles. Uniquely in the Arctic and Antarctic, the scientists benefit from a high level of research facilities but also hotels, restaurants and an international airport.

Existing literature has demonstrated how the accessibility and scientific richness of Svalbard derives from a desire to reinforce the governance of the territory by Norway (Pedersen, 2017; Pedersen, 2021; Roberts and Paglia, 2016; Strouk, 2020). The narrative of a territory « constructed by and for science » (Elzinga, 1993) is entangled with ambitions of asserting Norway's sovereignty over its archipelago as well as the interest of non-Arctic countries in the region.

In this contribution which derives from my Master dissertation (Strouk, 2020) and current PhD research, I draw on the idea that Svalbard is not just home for research facilities but is a research infrastructure itself, an "open-air laboratory" (Strouk, 2020), a « labscape » (Kohler, 2002). Moreover, governing these facilities and building-up Svalbard as a research infrastructure under the supervision of Norway participates in the governance of the whole territory. More recently and through the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the governance of science in Svalbard is no longer only organised around physical infrastructures but takes on a new virtual dimension, with the development of web-based services and infrastructures, such as the *Research in Svalbard* database and the Svalbard Integrated Earth Observing System (SIOS) (Duveau, 2021). I will explore how building up a new virtual research infrastructure around Svalbard reinforces Norway's governance. Finally, I argue that governing Svalbard through science is mainly about controlling the researcher's mobility in and around the archipelago.

Reference

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