

Social Media and Minority Languages

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Education and Culture DG

Social Media and Minority Languages

Convergence and the Creative Industries

Edited by
**Elin Haf Gruffydd Jones and
Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed**

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Contents

Contributors	viii
Preface	xi
<i>Elin Haf Gruffydd Jones</i>	
Introduction: Ethnic/Linguistic Minority Media – What their History Reveals, How Scholars have Studied them and What We might Ask Next	1
<i>Donald R. Browne and Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed</i>	
Part 1: Theoretical Debates on Convergence and Minority Languages	
1 Minority Language Media Studies and Communication for Social Change: Dialogue between Europe and Latin America	31
<i>Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed</i>	
2 Towards Ethnolinguistic Identity Gratifications	47
<i>László Vincze and Tom Moring</i>	
3 Minority Language Media, Convergence Culture and the Indices of Linguistic Vitality	58
<i>Elin Haf Gruffydd Jones</i>	
Part 2: Web 2.0, Social Networking Sites and Minority Languages	
4 Investigating the Differential Use of Welsh in Young Speakers' Social Networks: A Comparison of Communication in Face-to-Face Settings, in Electronic Texts and on Social Networking Sites	75
<i>Daniel Cunliffe, Delyth Morris and Cynog Prys</i>	

5	Luxembourgish on Facebook: Language Ideologies and Writing Strategies <i>Melanie Wagner</i>	87
6	Audience Design and Communication Accommodation Theory: Use of Twitter by Welsh–English Biliterates <i>Ian Johnson</i>	99
7	Kashubian and Modern Media: The Influence of New Technologies on Endangered Languages <i>Nicole Dołowy-Rybińska</i>	119
8	The Welsh Language on YouTube: Initial Observations <i>Daniel Cunliffe and Rhodri ap Dyfrig</i>	130
9	Learning Communities Mediated through Technology: Pedagogic Opportunities for Minority Languages <i>Niall Mac Uidhilin</i>	146
10	Enhancing Linguistic Diversity through Collaborative Translation: TraduXio, an Open Source Platform for Multilingual Workflow Management in Media <i>Philippe Lacour, Any Freitas, Aurélien Bénel, Franck Eyraud and Diana Zambon</i>	159
11	Experiences of Audience Interaction by BBC Network Radio Producers: Implications for Endangered Language Media <i>Philippa Law</i>	173

Part 3: Media Convergence and Creative Industries

12	Towards a Template for a Linguistic Policy for Minority Language Broadcasters <i>Eithne O'Connell</i>	187
13	Legislating the Language of Cinema: Developments in Catalonia <i>Júlia Cordonet and David Forniès</i>	202

14	The Contribution of BBC ALBA to Gaelic: A Social and Economic Review	212
	<i>Douglas Chalmers, Mike Danson, Alison Lang and Lindsay Milligan</i>	
15	Multilingual Practice of the EITB Group and its TV Provision for Teenagers	224
	<i>Amaia Pavón and Aitor Zuberogoitia</i>	
16	Tell a Song/Waiata Mai/Abair Amhrán: Singing Out	237
	<i>Ruth Lysaght</i>	
17	Languages: Obstacles and Brand Values in the Age of Media Convergence	246
	<i>Bea Narbaiza, Josu Amezaga, Edorta Arana and Patxi Azpillaga</i>	
	Concluding Remarks: Towards an Understanding of Media Impact on Minority Language Use	255
	<i>Mike Cormack</i>	
	Index	266

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Preface

The focus of this book is a response by a group of researchers to the changing landscapes of media and communication and in particular to issues and themes of particular relevance to ‘minority’ or ‘minoritised’¹ languages.

It is, by now, a tired platitude to state that the ways in which individuals and societies communicate with each other have been radically transformed through the advent of the popular, interactive internet and that social media have revolutionized our use of language. Yet, research into policies and practices is still conspicuously scarce, especially in the context of ‘minority’, ‘minoritised’, ‘lesser-used’, ‘regional’ or ‘less widely known’ languages. For that reason, the Mercator Network – with the support of its home institutions and the European Commission – brought together some of the most prominent academics involved in ‘minority language media studies’ together with new entrants to the field in order to debate and exchange ideas resulting in this publication.²

It is true to say that this group of researchers identifies strongly with the language communities they are researching. Many feel a close allegiance to, or indeed are part of, a specific language community where there is both an everyday lived experience of the awareness of the fragility of one’s own language and a manifest ambition to contribute towards its future. It may also be true to say that there is a shared concern with the survival and sustainability of other languages as well as one’s own and indeed of belonging to a wider research community. In the closing chapter of this collection, Mike Cormack notes that minority language media studies must be concerned with ‘how media can be used to help languages’. Significantly, he cautions that if ‘it drifts away from this focus, then it becomes simply a part of mainstream media studies that happens to look at minority languages and loses any claim to be a distinctive and coherent area of study’. It is from this engaged approach that this particular field of study has emerged.

This book is divided into five parts: Browne and Uribe-Jongbloed’s introductory essay explores the journey taken thus far in ethnic/linguistic minority media and suggests avenues for further research; Part 1 then proceeds with three chapters focusing on ‘Theoretical Debates on Convergence and Minority Languages’; Part 2 presents eight chapters on the theme of ‘Web 2.0, Social Networking Sites and Minority Languages’; Part 3 continues with six chapters focusing on ‘Media Convergence and Creative Industries’. The book closes with Cormack’s concluding remarks.

In their chapter, Browne and Uribe-Jongbloed’s examine what they term as ‘ethnic/linguistic minority media’, highlighting the complex

relationship between language and means of communication in societies where linguistic shift has happened to the detriment of the language of identification. Their overview of the history of these media identifies common threads that can be used to analyse the development of media policy, outlets and production – namely technology, economic support, government support, social movements, suspicion, perceived utility and finally convergence. The authors illustrate their arguments with examples from across the globe, while at the same time recognizing that the landscape is extremely varied from community to community. The second section of this chapter presents a history of the scholarly study of ethnic/linguistic minority media, a valuable insight into the key publications in this field, with particular focus on the period beyond the mid-1990s. In the third section of this essay the authors ask where we as researchers might go next and suggest the following topics: ‘languages’ (including language standards, the use of dialects and the relationship between media and language instruction), ‘the conception of professionalism’ (which Browne observes to be growing), ‘financing and promotion’ (including the complexities of serving more than one audience) and ‘developing a sense of community’ emphasizing the *interactional* aspect of community building and the increasingly important role that social media plays. The authors close their essay advocating two aspects of studying ethnic/linguistic minority media that are particularly relevant, namely *direct comparisons* and *cultural sensitivity*. They note that ‘in order to make direct comparisons, we need comparable dimensions’ and also argue the case for comparisons beyond Europe and North America. Cultural sensitivity, they claim, is imperative to ensure that the research and the conclusion are based on the soundest possible footings. Participatory research (which is explored further in Part 2) is recommended as one way of approaching cultural sensitivity in research.

In Part 1, three chapters present an engagement with different aspects of theoretical debates on convergence and minority languages. In the first of these ‘Minority Language Media Studies and Communication for Social Change: Dialogue between Europe and Latin America’, Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed makes the case for increased contact and exchange of ideas between these two schools of research. It advocates a ‘contextual approach that studies the processes of identity negotiation and participatory agency defined under the concepts of *hybridity* and *convergence*’. In addition, and sharing the notion of *cultural sensitivity* as proposed in Chapter 1, it urges ‘research to increase participation of its subjects of inquiry’, in accordance with the practices of communication for social change. Given the contextualized and activist approach of much of the research that takes

place in minority and minoritised language communities, it is anticipated that this approach will be embraced by many European researchers.

In their chapter, László Vincze and Tom Moring propose that ethnolinguistic identity can be a motivational variable for using specific media. They argue that this approach can lead to a better understanding of minority language media audiences. Their empirical study is based on Swedish-speaking and Finnish-speaking populations of Finland. Their results show that amongst Finnish speakers they saw small divergence from Finnish, yet among Swedish speakers – the minority language – there was a relatively large divergence from Swedish. They note that ‘gratifications sought and obtained seemed to be met amongst Finnish speakers, but not amongst Swedish speakers’. Furthermore, the study concluded that ‘some variables did not prove to be good predictors of minority language media use’ and that there were considerable asymmetries between majority and minority; for example, ‘local vitality’ of Swedish is a very important predictor in media use amongst Swedish speakers, whereas it is a rather weak predictor of media use amongst Finnish speakers. Finally, the authors restate the importance of *supply* of media in minority languages as this affects not only the gratification obtained but also those sought. After all, ‘nobody seeks media content that does not exist’.

The last chapter in this part examines some of the widely recognized indices that have been used to gauge linguistic vitality. It questions whether they are equally important in the context of convergence and in particular with regard to the position of ‘media’ in the various analyses of linguistic vitality and language revitalization. In the light of this, Jones presents a new reading of one of the seminal texts of this field of study, Joshua Fishman’s Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale presented in *Reversing Language Shift*. She suggests that the renowned sociolinguist’s perceived ‘unwillingness to recognise a positive role for the media’ was ‘largely rooted in the organizational power structures that control the media, which he (rightly) states are usually located beyond the minority language community and outside its influence and control’. However, an understanding of media in a converged, interactive environment as presented in social media and Web 2.0 makes it possible to argue that these too are part of ‘real neighbourhood life’ and as such should be high-priority tools and domains for language revitalization. Jones concludes her chapter by noting that ‘attempts to integrate online communication into the existing frameworks of assessing linguistic vitality will require a substantial overview of the present indices and the concepts from which they are derived’. She notes that ‘a simple assimilation of online communication within the indices associated with the old media paradigm of “one-to-many” distribution is not sufficient in itself’.

In her view, this ‘restricts our understanding of online communication as a mere shift in technology and the invention of new appliances without recognizing that convergence culture has, according to Jenkins and others, more to do with changes in cultural practices and heightened levels of participation and interactivity. She underlines the importance of elaborating ‘adequate and useful indices, especially if we want to do more than merely record and document the demise of linguistic diversity’.

Part 2 is entitled ‘Web 2.0, Social Networking Sites, and Minority Languages’. In the first of the eight chapters, Daniel Cunliffe, Delyth Morris and Cynog Prys draw on empirical evidence in the online and offline linguistic practices of young bilingual people in Wales. Their study presented in this chapter shows that young people *do* use the Welsh language on social media albeit to a lesser degree than they use English. Their findings echo those of Moring and Vincze in that the local community language is a factor in the language used online, implying a strong resonance with the observation made by Ellison *et al.* (2007) that online social networks tend to replicate real-world social networks, rather than create new ones. They note that while English is the main language of surfing, Facebook represents a space on the web where they speak Welsh. This finding can be seen as an example of the interactive web – or Web 2.0 – and social media being better for minority language use than the less participatory aspects of the internet.

In the next chapter, Melanie Wagner draws particular attention to the importance of literacy and of writing in order to communicate in the online world. The field work provides an insight into language ideologies and attitudes towards the different languages spoken in Luxembourg, and the conflicting voices expressed. The author concludes that ‘Facebook is being used as a platform to discuss these issues’ and ‘a platform for written Luxembourgish that did not exist before ... which has brought attention to discussions never before available to the public eye’.

Next in Chapter 6, Ian Johnson draws our attention again to online literacy. Here, he studies the practices of a group of Twitter users within the framework of these two seminal sociolinguistic theories: audience design and communication accommodation theory. His findings suggest that there is much reciprocity between the online linguistic behaviour and the practice norms of Welsh–English bilingual communities. However, the research also points to ‘a far greater difference between use of spoken and written Welsh than that implied in the Census returns’, with a ‘number of Welsh–English bilingual speakers, known to the author to use Welsh in face-to-face contexts, showed no bi-literate skills in their use of Twitter’. The lack of opportunities to read Welsh both online and offline may well have a bearing on users’ ‘textual cues’ and thus affect their application of literacy. It is also

suggested that private conversations conducted offline in Welsh are now being conducted online, but in English, performed with an ‘eavesdropping’ audience in mind. Furthermore, the author concludes that the non-use of Welsh is a matter of serious concern for language revitalization.

The next chapter takes us to quite a different community, especially in terms of literary and literacy traditions. Unlike Welsh, with its continuous tradition of written literature since the Middle Ages, the Kashubian language is, in fact, beginning its literary period alongside the internet as is highlighted by Nicole Dołowy-Rybinska. Once again, literacies and the practice of writing languages in the context of online activity are examined. In her survey, Nicole Dołowy-Rybinska observes ‘the internet has provided the opportunity to use Kashubian outside the oral sphere – prior to the rise of the internet, Kashubian writing was reserved to a narrow band of experts’. The advent of the internet has created ‘spaces where the use of Kashubian is “natural”’. Furthermore, she identifies three specific characteristics of the infrastructure provided by internet communication: it is ‘elastic (it is simple to adapt to a local context), non-hierarchical (it allows people to meet and talk on equal footing) and scalable (new people are able to join projects to change and improve them)’. The observations and conclusions in this chapter suggest that the internet is indeed a vital form of communication to create a linguistic community for young users of Kashubian.

Cunliffe and ap Dyfrig’s chapter focuses on another popular online site. They attempt both ‘to characterize the Welsh-language media space on YouTube’ and ‘to explore some of the methodological issues and research questions raised’ in this research project. Unlike previous chapters, where the focus has been clearly on social media where written forms of communication dominate, Cunliffe and ap Dyfrig explore different modes of communication and content. They note that the ‘audiovisual nature of YouTube and the predominance of music content also permit language to be less of a critical issue in comparison to blogging’. Their observations infer that ‘it is difficult to argue on the basis of this sample that there is a coherent Welsh language media space’. However, this may not be simply a matter of lack of material or a shortage of users. They argue that the ‘limited use of social networking functionality on YouTube also suggests that coherent linguistically hermetic media spaces may not be an obvious feature in any of the languages which are not yet officially supported by the site’.

Niall Mac Uidhlin (Chapter 9) explores the use of online approaches in language learning. He draws on several sociocultural approaches to learning and literacies, such as ‘collaborative learning’ and Gee’s (2008) notions of *Discourses* and powerful literacies. In discussing the application of Web 2.0 practices to learning communities, he observes that the ‘participatory nature