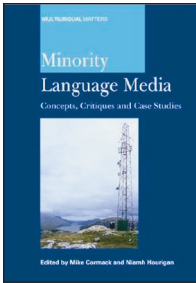


## Reviews



**Minority Language Media: Concepts, Critiques and Case Studies.** Edited by Mike Cormack and Niamh Hourigan. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters LTD. 2007. 274 pp. ISBN: 9781853599637.

Minority languages have been oppressed, denied, and neglected for a long time, and their decline is accelerating. Whereas estimates show that half of the world's languages disappeared from 1450 to 1950, half of the remaining 6000 to 7000 languages could disappear in this century alone. Some observers include globalization and new media technologies among the factors contributing to this extinction. Some others, however, see new media, such as satellite television and the Internet, as the salvation of minority languages. This book is a solid and major contribution to our understanding of the complex relationship between media, language maintenance, and language development. Although the book mainly focuses on Western Europe, its eclectic range of topics could resonate with minority language situations around the world. The book serves the editors' ambitious project: to establish minority language media as a discrete field of study connected to, but independent of, media studies, and applied linguistics or sociolinguistics.

Initially developed out of the First Mercator International Symposium on Minority Languages and Research, a 2003 symposium sponsored by the European Commission, the book consists of fourteen chapters. In addition to the excellent introductory and concluding chapters by editors Mike Cormack and Niamh Hourigan, there are twelve chapters organized into two sections. The first section sets the context, describing key terms (e.g., minority language), presenting a rich literature review of the field, and mapping the theoretical and methodological issues. This section also furnishes an insightful analysis of networks of campaigns for minority television, the "knowledge economy" of digital media and its implications for minority language media, and recording the history of minority language broadcasting. The second section contains incisive case studies featuring more specific issues: the empowering affordances of the Internet for minority cultures, the crucial role of local television in the Basque Country and Catalonia in language normalization ("the recovery of public use of [the minority] language in all fields") (p. 171), the representational affordances of local television in Wales, emphasizing the linguistic aspects of minority media production (e.g. translation, dubbing and subtitling), and finally, the struggle for putting sign language on British television.

A common thread that connects these chapters is the belief that it is important to maintain and develop minority languages and the stance that the media have a crucial role to play in maintaining and developing minority languages. Minority language media are deemed

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important for: a) their symbolic role in acknowledging that minority cultures can deal with the contemporary world; b) their ability to legitimate the existence of the language that they use; c) their potential to provide an “economic boost” for those who are interested in working in the minority language; d) their instrumentality in engendering a public sphere within a language community; e) their resourcefulness in enabling minorities to represent their community, not only within itself but also to outsiders instead of being re-presented by “others”; f) their capability to be conveyers of cultures and producers of cultural products; and g) their capability to magnify discursive practices of identity construction.

The book also reveals an array of challenges faced by minority language media and their advocates. For example, Daniel Cunliffe notes, not all minorities have access to or are able to own and use new media, and if they do, the increase in minority language media is outpaced by an even faster increase of media in the dominant language, as suggested by Cormack. Cormack also reminds us that the media, because of their need to attract advertising revenue, often favour large audiences and thus the majority language markets. It is also problematic, according to him, if minority media are not able to attract audiences and make connections with the speakers of the language.

Another strength of the book is its ability to strike a balance between the position that perceives digital media as instruments of English hegemony, and the position that sees new media as the saviours of minority languages. For example, whereas Daniel Cunliffe in his chapter “Minority Languages and the Internet: New Threats, New Opportunities,” looks at the affordances of the Internet and how some online tools can enable minority language speakers to change their role from consumers of majority media to producers of minority media content, in her chapter, “Media Policy and Language Policy in Catalonia,” Maria Corominas Piulats raises the concern with respect to Catalonians’ frequent use of online content in English instead of their first language. As another example, Cunliffe, on the one hand, expresses optimism that “a real opportunity exists for those languages that have the resources and the determination to make the transition to the Internet” (p. 147); on the other, he suggests that although Internet research can be very challenging, much more research is needed to identify actual utilization of online resources that could best serve minorities.

One of the limits, but not necessarily a weakness, of this book is its narrow focus on “indigenous” minority languages in Western Europe, a focus that excludes “immigrant languages” not to mention minority languages around the world (for an insightful discussion that addresses some aspects of this research gap see pp. 249-253). Donald Browne’s contribution “Speaking Up: A Brief History of Minority Languages and the Electronic Media Worldwide” stands out in that it widens the scope and provides “the first history of minority language broadcasting, drawing on a wide range of examples from around the world” (p. 13). This, however, has not been accomplished without difficulty. For example, regarding the Kurdish language, the author writes, “Iraq’s national radio service initiated Kurdish language programming in 1939. *In the ensuing years, other states with Kurdish minorities—Iran, Turkey and Syria—followed suit*, but such services often were discontinued and recommenced” (p. 109, emphasis added). It is difficult to reconcile the emphasized portion of this assertion when we know that until 1991 Turkey imposed a strict ban on Kurdish.

What might also be seen as a shortcoming is the virtual absence of audience research. Little is revealed as to how, when, to what extent, in what circumstances, and with what sorts of impact speakers of minority languages use their media. Having said that, it should also be clear that the editor, Mike Cormack, does acknowledge the importance of this,

since, as part of his ecological research approach, he suggests several relevant questions that researchers should seek answers to through observing actual media use by audiences and interviewing them.

Notwithstanding these minor shortcomings and a few typos (e.g., pp. 62, 63, 69), this book is a major contribution to the study of minority language media. Cormack's contributions "Introduction: Studying Minority Language Media" and "The Media and Language Maintenance," as well as Hourigan's "Minority Language Media Studies: Key Themes for Future Scholarship" serve as solid and exceptional starting points for anyone interested in investigating minority language media. Cormack's introduction is devoted to a concise survey of previous studies of minority language media. His chapter builds on Einar Haugen's work to develop an "ecological approach" to investigating this question: "In what ways can different media interact with other aspects of languages use to contribute, directly or indirectly, to language maintenance in specific communities" (p. 62)? Hourigan expands this question by indentifying more areas for future scholarship in connection to minority language media. They further illustrate that "minority language media studies can now be seen as an established field of study, one with its own research agenda, and one that is energized by the awareness of the fragility of the situations of many minority languages" (p. 15). Many of those fragile languages belong to the 50% of languages in the world today that will likely die by the end of this century.

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