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Carving a niche for minority language media studies not so easy

Social Media and Minority Languages: Convergence and the Creative Industries, edited by Elin Haf Gruffydd Jones and Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed. Bristol, UK: Multilinguial Matters, 2013, 267 pp. ISBN 9781847699046.

WHENEVER a new field of research emerges a lot of shuffling and sorting of knowledge is required to establish a niche, to define its boundaries, to encourage acknowledgement of the area and to stimulate debate concerning the application of various methodologies and theoretical frameworks. This is the case with *Social Media and Minority Languages: Convergence and the Creative Industries*. The catalyst
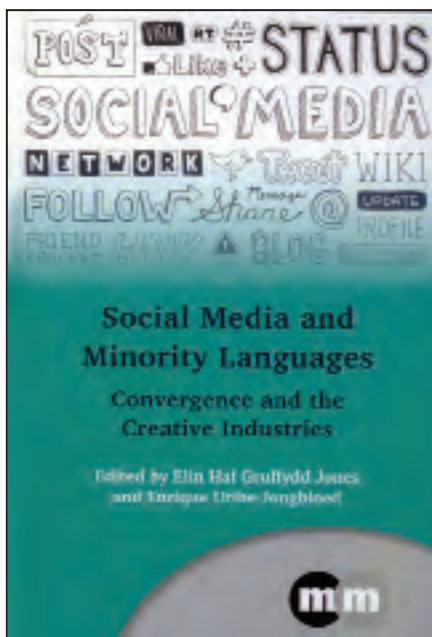
for the book's production, as implied by the title, is the technological advancement of social media, the resulting convergence of media in the digital age, and perhaps most importantly the positive and negative effects these have on minority or minoritised languages. Yet in reviewing its 17 chapters by more than 30 authors, it is clear the overall objective appears to be strongly focused on the reinforcement of Minority Language Media (MLM) as a field of study distinct from mainstream media studies because of its specific concern with 'how media can be used to help languages' (p. 255).

Concern about the loss and main-

tenance of minority languages is not new and has been the focus of a range of disciplines from anthropology and linguistics, to sociology, post-colonial and cultural studies. In the book's introduction by Donald Browne and Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed, we are told that MLM first emerged as a field of study in the 1980s. This, they say, is in spite of the fact that ethnic, indigenous and linguistic minority media have been present for a great deal longer with Welsh language periodicals appearing in the late 18th century and the printing of African-American newspapers beginning in 1827. Browne and Uribe-Jongbloed provide an historical overview of MLM research with important background material and insights into MLM development that has been shaped by 'technology, economic support, social movements, suspicion and perceived utility' (p. 5). The authors take a chronological look at numerous studies indicating the connection between minority languages, communication and media—though, as the authors admit, their survey is far from comprehensive because they simply cannot cover the wealth of literature that has flourished in this area especially in the past two decades. Nevertheless, the introduction sets the scene as an important segue to the rest of the book's content which is divided into three parts.

Part one: 'Theoretical Debates on Convergence and Minority Languages' contains three chapters—the first of which is the personal perspective of Uribe-Jongbloed who emphasises the need for the cross fertilisation of ideas and perspectives between researchers particularly in Latin America and Europe. His chapter concentrates on theories of hybridity and convergence, but shares a common theme with the second chapter by Laszlo Vincze and Tom Moring who focus on bilingualism in Finland. Both chapters consider the important topic of the negotiations of identity in the media. The third chapter by another of the book's editors, Gruffydd Jones, highlights the discourse of linguistic vitality of MLM. This chapter will mainly be of interest to sociolinguists and those who understand the 'widely known indices' of linguistic vitality. Gruffydd Jones considers whether these indices are useful tools in the wider debate on linguistic diversity in the 'age of convergence culture' (p. 61). 'Attempts to integrate the existence of online communication into the existing frameworks of assessing linguistic vitality', she concludes, 'will require a substantial overview of the present indices and the concepts from which they are derived' (p. 70).

Part two: 'Web 2.0, Social Networking Sites and Minority Languages'

offers seven case studies that explore a wide range of new media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and multilingual content sites. There are chapters that examine translation websites and online learning communities as well as those that discuss the status of minority languages such as Luxembourgish and Kashubian. The chapter by Philippa Law about BBC network radio producers and their experience of audience interaction offers recommendations for the support of minority language maintenance both online and offline. However, she also points out that language activists and minority language communities must take into account what is best for the language concerned. Consideration must be given, for example, to the 'correctness and fluency of the minority language permitted on air' and whether the aim is to 'encourage audiences to talk, or to increase their confidence in writing' (p.181).

Part three: 'Media Convergence and Creative Industries' focuses on areas of public policy, law and media practice and includes some interesting chapters about minority languages such as Welsh, Catalan, Basque and Scottish Gaelic. New Zealand readers will be pleased to see the inclusion of a study by Ruth Lysaght that compares two traditional singing programmes screened by indigenous television stations—*Moteatea* on Māori Television and the other *Abair Amhran* on TG4—an Irish language television station. Presenting traditional songs on screen, the author concludes, draws on the 'power of a continuous oral tradition to create a new relationship between people and their language and culture' (p.245)

Social Media and Minority Languges is a book with great potential in bringing attention to the advantages and disadvantage for minority languages in an era of media convergence. However, it is let down somewhat by a rather old-fashioned and uninspiring green cover crowded with hand drawn labels and icons relating to digital media such as 'tweet', 'shared, 'wiki', 'viral', 'post' and 'social media'. The content of the book is academically focused and is intense to the point of 'information overload' with the numerous chapters taking the reader on a MLM roller coaster ride, twisting and turning through a labyrinth of topics, media platforms, minority languages, theories and methods. However this proves just how difficult it is to rein in an emerging field such as MLM particularly when so many different minority language communities exist. As Donald Brown and Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed state in the introduction:

> Simply put, the existence of more and more minority media, combined with a growing recognition of the minority presence in various societies, has alerted scholars to a form of communication that demands greater attention. (p. 1)

Given that MLM is a relatively new field of research it seems that the editors are eager to display its diversity in order to justify the designation of MLM as having, and maintaining, a distinct point of difference from mainstream media and communication studies. Whether that status can be maintained, I suggest, is somewhat dependent on the objectives of researchers themselves and the impact of further developments in technology which are likely to continue to blur the boundaries between mainstream and minority language media studies.

At the same time, the book performs an important function, as stated in the preface by Gruffydd Jones, in 'creating and enriching an international discourse in favour of minority languages and linguistic diversity' (p. XX). But clearly the ultimate goal of *Social Media and Minority Languages* is to encourage academics in the growing field of MLM to remain focused on understanding how media can best be used for the benefit of minority languages whether this relates to maintenance, funding, support by broadcasters, or language planning policies. Whether that is achievable only time will tell as the shuffling and sorting of knowledge continues.