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# Minority Media

## 📄 Summary

Media in a minority language is an essential tool for intra-minority communication in non-territorial autonomy settings, yet minority language media outlets face several challenges. Usually, their potential audience (viewers, subscribers) is too small to operate in a financially sustainable way. Moreover, the challenges for print media are more severe, as minority print media cannot rationalise through economies of scale, i.e., a merger with other newspapers. On the other hand, digitisation and the development of niche functions can provide opportunities for minority language media to survive and strengthen the institutions of non-territorial autonomy settings.

# Recommendations

▶ Minority language media has an important and stabilising function for a national minority and is a key element of non-territorial autonomy (NTA). It is therefore desirable to ensure the existence of minority language media through specific funding schemes.

▶ Minority language media should be by, and not just for, the minority. Minority members and minority language speakers should be involved in public service media. Indeed, public service media bears a special responsibility towards minorities and must be aware of its role in NTA settings. That role can be fulfilled through specific broadcasting programmes in the minority language and on minority issues, as well as minority language versions of regular programmes.

▶ Some media outlets for minorities rely on funds available in the country of residence. In principle, that is recommendable if no political strings are attached. However, recent developments in the media landscape of some European countries have meant minority language media outlets have restricted the scope of their reporting to meet the expectations of political forces. Minority language media should be independent from direct and indirect government interference, as a free media is a constituent element of democratic societies.

▶ Digitisation offers opportunities for small scale broadcastings programmes. Minorities should be encouraged to use such opportunities to create innovative formats for reporting, communicating and promoting minority issues and culture.

▶ The media is an attractive area for involving the younger members of a minority. Minorities that witness a decline in young people's interest in engaging with the community's affairs should attract them with, among other things, the possibility of developing traditional and social media and co-creating youth-oriented events and socio-economic activities.

▶ In border regions, minority language media should cooperate with other regional media to provide better synergy in cross-border communication, information and awareness of barriers and opportunities for regional development.

▶ Delicate majority-minority dynamics risk becoming ever more fragile in an age of nationalism, culture wars and increasing affective and antagonistic demarcations between group identities. Minority language media outlets may therefore provide the perfect platform for public journalism, thus fostering intercultural dialogue between citizens.

# Introduction

The media ensures communication to and within a community of users. The mass media has played a key role in mobilising societies and that applies to creating and democratising nations as imagined communities (Anderson, 1983). Media outlets have been shown to play a key role in nationalisation processes, as well as providing a channel for mass propaganda to inform, mobilise and subjugate citizens in totalitarian societies. They create public awareness and influence public opinion. They inform about what is happening in a community beyond everyday communication between individuals. They also filter information and thus function as gatekeepers on what is and is not reported.

# The importance of minority language media

Democratic societies need multiple channels of information within a pluralist system based on freedom of expression. In 20th-century Europe, the printed press operated within a pluralist system, while radio and TV were mostly introduced as public service channels, with national monopolies or duopolies financed by compulsory licence fees. Private channels, funded by advertisement, were only introduced in the 1980s. Then, digitalisation via the internet greatly increased opportunities for communication, leading to the changing global media landscape of today.

Minorities in NTA settings face a special challenge, because they do not automatically have access to public service media and usually do not have enough critical mass to establish commercial media outlets. Indeed, NTA is usually applied to organise minorities that are dispersed across a state or a sub-region of a state, and they are often numerically inferior at the sub-regional level too. Additionally, minority members in such constellations are almost exclusively bilingual, with command of both the minority language and the official language of the state of residence. That poses an extra challenge to the minority media, as it must compete with both regional and national media outputs operating with considerably superior financial and editorial resources.

Minority media research focuses on several different issues. First, the key role of minority media in minority language media policy in theory and practice (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes, 2011); second, the necessary critical mass, especially taking into account Cormack's seven factors (Cormack, 1998; Uribe-Jongbloed, 2014); third, the patronising effect of failing to differentiate between media *for* and media *by* minorities (Caspi & Elias, 2011); and fourth, resources and funding for minority language media in economic crises and the challenges of digitalisation (Zabaleta et al., 2014; Zabaleta & Xamardo, 2022).

Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes (2011) recognise three different eras for minority language media:

1. The gifting era: associated with decolonisation and modernisation, involving management and deployment of minority language resources to achieve presence and visibility within the nation-state media system.
2. The service era: a move away from the provision of media space to the provision of a service for minority language speakers, shifting from media as a means of being part of the picture of the modern nation state to media as a means of developing the minority community and making it fit for the modern world.
3. The performance era: resulting in a less top-down and more bottom-up and fragmented media landscape covering different channels of communication.

The critical mass for minority media is illustrated by Cormack's seven-factor model (Cormack, 1998; Uribe-Jongbloed, 2014). In 1988, Cormack considered 1 million users to be the minimum population size for justifying the full range of modern media (Cormack, 1998, cit. after Uribe-Jongbloed, 2014, p. 38). That critical mass can be reached by minorities in a territorial autonomy (TA), but not within contemporary European NTA settings, thus demonstrating that minority media outlets usually need access to special funding. Here, Zabaleta and Xamardo (2022) argue that public funding for minority media should not be framed as aid but as a social, cultural and economic investment.

In border regions, kin-state media may also serve minorities. However, that may not be desirable for the state of residence for geopolitical reasons (e.g. Russian-speakers in Estonia and Latvia). Socio-cultural and political reasons specific to the minority may also apply, as kin-state media does not usually place a special focus on socio-cultural and political issues in the minority's state of residence.

Despite the economic, structural and competitiveness challenges for minority language media outlets, research on the subject observes the potential of their strength as active players embedded in their minority community, focusing on active community management and involvement (Zabaleta et al., 2014).

## Empirical foundation: a case study of minority newspapers

This section is based on a case study of minority newspapers carried out by the authors in 2021-22. A survey was distributed to 30 minority language newspapers that are part of the European Association of Daily Newspapers in Minority and Regional Languages (MIDAS), which also promoted the survey. Survey results were complemented with interviews on site at German minority media offices in Poland and Polish minority media offices in the Czech Republic, as well as a pilot study on the Lithuanian minority media in Poland.

The empirical data gathered in eight surveys and four interviews suggest that the main task of minority media outlets is perceived as catering for the minority and its members. Minority media outlets provide a communication channel to and from minority members by reporting on activities, political discussions and challenges within the minority. They also support the minorities' political efforts and monopolistic minority parties in election campaigns, especially by mobilising minority membership to vote for the minority party. While minority language media outlets in TA settings are economically sustainable and usually operate on a full scale as regional media, that is not the case with minority media in NTA settings. Some newspapers have a relatively permanent framework of subsidies that ensure operation, while others' economic frameworks are less stable. Subsidies can come from the kin-state or from frameworks in the state of residence for financing local and minority media.

Providing media outlets with professional staff who report the news and develop messages is another issue and we observed a highly diversified approach in that regard. Media outlets with access to stable funding and subsidies employ regular staff and supply professional infrastructure, software and hardware. They also develop marketing and sales, as well as public relations activities, to increase their audience. They promote themselves, events and other issues related to minorities and can therefore develop their activities dynamically. Media outlets that rely on volunteers, on the other hand, do not have that potential and are generally less well equipped. We also observed examples of a combined model, in which minority media outlets work with a few professional journalists, along with a larger team of part-time and/or voluntary journalists who contribute to the newspapers and other media.

Special cross-border activities by minority media were also noted and outlets often become a bridge between the country of origin and the host country, helping build or shape cross-border relations. For instance, such actions have been conducted by the Lithuanian minority media in Poland and the Polish minority media in the Czech Republic.

Minority language media outlets in TA settings usually operate as full-scale regional media, covering all important aspects of daily life. In NTA settings, minority language media outlets focus on minority life and issues relevant to the minority. That function is essential for the minority's survival as an organised group, as other media outlets do not normally cater for specific minority issues. Some media outlets have found a niche as cross-border outlets. Examples include the newspaper of the Danish minority in Germany, *Flensborg Avis*, and that of the German minority in Denmark, *Der Nordschleswiger*. They also cooperate with the newspapers read by the regional majority in a joint editorial office, where texts and pictures are shared.

## Policy implications

▸ Minority language media is a necessary channel for intra-minority communication in NTA settings. Contrary to nationwide or regional media in the majority language, minority language media outlets are not usually economically sustainable. Therefore, special solutions to provide funding for minority language media are needed.

▸ As with print media in general, minority language print media faces special challenges from ongoing digitisation and multiplication of media and other communication channels. Here, minority language media outlets can specialise by developing niche functions, such as a special focus on cross-border issues in a border region, or reporting on cultural events in minority language, which may attract spectators beyond the minority population. Furthermore, digitisation and new digital communication channels also open up new opportunities for organising intra-minority communication in NTA settings.

▸ The language and communication styles of social media can encourage or discourage minority youth from becoming actively involved in minority activities. Thus, the strategy of developing and promoting social media in minority languages should comprise an innovative message, providing an attractive and understandable language style for the younger generation.

▸ In border regions, media in minority languages can also be useful as a specific communication tool among societies and local actors in the kin-state as well as the state of residence. Minority language media should be included in the policies and strategies of cross-border regional development.

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