

Gaelic and New Media

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What are the implications of social media and other recent digital media forms for efforts to use the media to support minority languages such as Gaelic?

By “new media” I here mean those media which have user-generated content. We should not get bogged down on different forms of new media (which may change quickly enough anyway) but think of the principles behind them all: randomly accessible databases, users as content producers, multiple and virtually uncontrollable users. By language support, I mean preserving a language, maintaining it, expanding the community of speakers. This suggests top-down activity—language planners trying to encourage the language or particular versions of it, with the four classic forms of language planning (corpus planning, status planning, language acquisition, language use).

The central issue is the lack of control over such new media forms. This means no enforceable standards, no planning, no restrictions of content, and in general no ability to steer media use in one direction or another. From one point of view, this might be seen as an ideal media situation, but from the point of view of efforts to use the media to help a threatened language, the situation is highly problematical. And this is the significance of referring specifically to Gaelic, rather than other minority languages such as Basque. With numbers so low, and (consequently) financial support very limited, each initiative to support the language, each method of doing this, becomes more critical.

And we cannot simply bank on older media, such as digital broadcasting, surviving unchanged. We may still have mixed channels with published schedules, but these newer media are already changing the ways people engage with broadcasting. Perhaps, of course, as with earlier media “revolutions” (video, cable TV, websites) the big companies will come to dominate. Certainly one of the major changes in the last year or two in Facebook, Twitter and YouTube has been in the way in which traditional media concerns have involved themselves. But it would be rash to say that their victory is likely to be as complete as in the earlier revolutions. The move to user-generated material is a fundamental change.

In addition, these media now permeate virtually every situation. Fishman's neat categorizations of linguistic life are becoming meaningless—or at least unhelpful—when social media can be used in all settings.

There is another issue here—how can we research the role of these new media? Certainly descriptive research is possible, noting the uses people are making of media, but we are not talking about a single cohesive media audience any more. So the sample we choose to study becomes problematic (even more so than in traditional methods of audience research). And it is not clear how we could, for example, measure impact beyond simply noting the amount of “chatter”.

Is there a solution to this? If we don't think about language planning then what can we think about? The key element becomes “use”—of any kind. Attitudes to the language must be such as to encourage this. They must also not just accept linguistic change but embrace it. Where does this leave language planners? Is language planning a thing of the past? The question is not “How can we use social media for language planning” but rather, “How can language use be encouraged in an era in which language planning is becoming obsolete?”

From all of this I would suggest several conclusions. (1) Language planning is not a real option, just as language policing is not either. (2) Encouragement of all and any use of language is important. But this is separate from developing media forums. In an era of “open” media, it is the users who must be encouraged, not the traditional producers. (3) But we cannot depend on non-spoken uses if a language is to flourish in any real sense. The gathering of services around the mobile phone is perhaps the most optimistic sign.

It is not clear precisely when a language might be said to be “dead”, but the kind of situation which can be foreseen now with Gaelic is certainly not a healthy one—linguistic near-extinction in traditional communities, the language coming to exist predominantly in written forms and in media products (from DVDs to websites), and in rather artificially developed communities (including what might be called “part-time” communities, for example in cities).

The question we are left with is how new media forms can be used to help threatened languages, rather than than just speeding them along to, if not death, then at least a form without a firm socio-economic base in an actual (as opposed to virtual) community.