

Chapter 16

Linguistic Minorities on the Internet

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the results of an empirical study (done using online ethnography and discourse analysis) of how the Kurds use the Internet. In examining this situation, the author provides suggestions related to the fact that, as much as we need to be concerned with the dominance of a few major languages on the Internet, we also need to map the online presence of linguistic minorities. Such mapping is essential in order to understand the paradoxical nature of a medium that simultaneously homogenizes and fragments linguistic communities and identities.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet represents one of the most interactive, fast-changing, and accessible media forms in human history. Its use is inexorably connected to issues like language and identity – issues that are of great concern to human beings. In fact, scholars such as Appadurai (1996) have suggested that the Internet is a force that is augmenting the spread of cultural globalization, or what Held et al. (1999) refer to as the movement of “objects, signs and

people across regions and intercontinental space” (p. 329). By extension, this situation also often means extending American hegemony and the English language at the expense of other national and regional cultures and other languages and identities (Phillipson, 2009).

Within this context, it has been suggested that the Internet undermines the existence of linguistic minorities¹ (Thussu, 2000). Other studies, however, have illustrated that the Internet can empower marginal groups and speakers of minority languages by enabling them to communicate across geographical, social, and political boundar-

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ies to develop their languages, display their own way of life, and voice their concerns and issues (Castells, 2004; Cunliffe, 2007; Danet & Herring, 2007; Erikson, 2007). Yet still others have warned against “unproblematized” views such as perceiving the Internet as a utopian space where all individuals and all groups have equal access to the production, dissemination, and consumption of information (Wei & Kolko, 2005). Cunliffe and Harries (2005), for example, illustrate that the online use of minority languages could be a very complex activity and, in some cases, even problematic. As the Internet is relatively new and constantly changing, the end of this debate is nowhere in sight. Rather, much more research on Internet usage, especially by speakers of minority languages and members of smaller cultural groups, is needed to flesh out the extent to which language and identity are undermined or fostered by global Internet expansion.

This paper contributes to this line of research by examining the ways Kurds use the Internet to construct, reproduce, and disseminate discursive constructions of their identities. Claiming to be the largest non-state nation in the world (McDowall, 2004), the Kurds’ language, territory, culture and political destiny have been fractured among at least four regions, including parts of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Much of this fragmentation has been due to the lack of easy communication among Kurds who are divided by harsh terrain and the national and political borders of the states in which they live – factors that have kept them apart for decades, if not centuries. Despite this situation, a sense of Kurdishness and belonging to a common cultural identity has persisted (van Bruinessen, 2000).

The objective of this chapter is to present the results of a study done to examine the extent to which the Kurds have been able to use the Internet to carry out trans-border communication activities and to consolidate their identities. Kurdish identity is often characterised in terms of a language unique to the Kurds – a language that is said to separate the

Kurds from neighbouring majority nationalities such as Arabs, Turks, and Persians. Therefore, an examination of the role of the Internet as it relates to the formation of Kurdish identity must involve an examination of the languages the Kurds use on the Internet, how and for what purposes they use these languages, and what implications Internet usage practices might have for not only Kurdish language and identity, but also our understanding of the interfaces between language, identity, and the Internet. Through exploring these issues, the author suggests that, as much as it is valid and necessary to concern ourselves with the socio-political power dimensions of the dominance of English on the Internet and related issues of access to online environments (e.g., the global digital divide), it is also valid to acknowledge and demonstrate that the Internet is enabling marginalized and oppressed minorities to revitalize their languages, reinforce their cultural symbols, and reify their regional and transnational identities in unprecedented ways.

To illustrate these ideas, the chapter will present certain central concepts in order to provide a context for best understanding this study. Several theoretical issues will be outlined and background information on Kurds, Kurdistan, and the Kurdish Internet will be discussed. This discussion will be followed by a description of the methods used for data collection and analysis in relation to studying the Kurdish internet. Data analysis findings, informed by a media discourse analytic approach, will be carried out in two parts. First, the main features of the Internet that are utilised by the Kurds will be identified. In so doing, examples of how Internet resources are used for the construction of group identity will be provided. Second, findings and observations of the socio-cultural and political contexts that bear upon the online activities of the Kurds will be analyzed and discussed. Finally, the main theoretical assumptions about the interface between language, cultural identity, and the Internet will be revisited.

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