



# A MEDIA CALL TO THE FUTURE

A needs assessment of minority- and regional-language media in digital transition in Europe

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NewsSpectrum is a new fellowship programme that supports collaboration between minority- and majority-language media in Europe.

NewsSpectrum is managed as a partnership between the Vienna-based International Press Institute (IPI) and the European Association of Daily Newspapers in Minority and Regional Languages (MIDAS). The European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERAC) is a supporting partner.

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# Introduction

Minority- and regional-language media have long been central to the media ecosystem, particularly across the diverse linguistic landscape of Europe and the European Union. They bring a unique offering to their community, positioning them well to adapt to the opportunities of the digital transition, including the pivot to reader revenues.

They face, too, specific challenges in this adaptation process as media platforms increasingly globalize, traditional audiences age, and news consumption habits shift.

As part of the digital transition, minority- and regional-language are confronted with changes in audience demands and business models as well as distribution challenges. The result? It's driving a rethink about everything about themselves from their audiences and the journalism that best suits their needs through to the products they use and the distribution tools that best find their communities where they are. This demands specific attention and support to ensure minority-language media can grasp the opportunities of the moment.

The United States, while different, demonstrates a potential for minority media, including minority-language media. In a major review in November, [Axios found](#): "Ethnic news outlets have been filling a void in local news, and serving up coverage that seeks to rectify journalistic bias in story selection and how news is framed."

This paper seeks to identify the needs of minority-language media with a particular focus on Europe and the European Union. It has been prepared by the [International Press Institute \(IPI\)](#), a global network of journalists, editors, and publishers, in collaboration with the European Association of Daily Newspapers in Minority and Regional Languages ([MIDAS](#)). It is based on eight deep interviews with minority-media news leaders and media thinkers and five written survey responses.

At the core of the challenge is: how do minority- and regional-language media in Europe transition from a one-way source of news TO their communities in an information-constrained environment into multi-directional voices OF and FOR their communities in a time of information abundance and in a way that will shore up their sustainability?

# What do we mean by minority and regional media?

Minority and regional media aim to meet the needs of about 50 million people in the European Union (about one in nine) who speak a primary language other than the dominant language(s) of the nation state in which they live. There is no single definition of minority media. For membership purposes, MIDAS, whose members are media outlets publishing in regional minority languages, defines “minority media” as media where at least 51 percent of the content is produced in a regional or minority language. However, for research purposes this definition could be broadened to include fully bilingual media (50/50) or media that publish a smaller percentage of their content in a minority language but nevertheless play a crucial role in the minority-language landscape.

For the purpose of this report, "minority language" is understood as a language used in an EU member state that is not the dominant language of the majority of that state's population. This includes not only regional media, but also migrant- and Roma-language media.

Concretely, this project looks at media in EU member states for:

- ⇒ People who live in historic communities outside the borders of the primary nation state of their language, sometimes near the national border of a country of the dominant language group, such as the German-speaking community in South Tyrol, or sometimes more remotely like the German-speaking community in Romania.
- ⇒ Regional language groups where there is no nation state where the language is dominant. They are usually spoken as a minority within a single state or states, such as Catalan or Basque, or in communities across multiple states such as Romani.
- ⇒ Recently migrated communities, now usually from outside Europe, such as Arab-language media, usually concentrated in major cities, or expatriate media in large global languages such as English or Chinese that also act as a link to home.

Media serving each of these different types of communities face similar challenges in managing the digital transition. However, the appropriate response will differ as audiences and communities differ in information needs and community support.

# Understanding the audience

Minority- and regional-language media appeal to audiences in communities who have twin overlapping identities: the nation and the language, with the weighting of each dependent on the individual circumstances of the language group in any given country. Internet distribution tugs at this intersection, with news and information in most cases readily available from the home country or countries of the language. The increasing dominance of national media in each country pulls from the other end of the thread, providing national news in the national language.

That already difficult intersection can be further challenged in cases in which dominant language governments seek to minimize the cultural and political impact of minority languages within their borders. In some cases, minority-language media have faced a history of oppression in parallel to efforts to stamp out minority languages. Populist governments in the home country of the language may also pull at that identity, seeking to give primacy to the cultural imperatives of the language.

Moussa Al-Jamaat from [Baynana](#), a bilingual magazine in Arabic and Spanish, created and managed by Syrian refugee journalists, says: “Our magazine aims to offer useful information to the Arabic-speaking community in Spain and, at the same time, build bridges between migrants, refugees and Spanish people of foreign origin, and the rest of the population. Baynana means ‘Among us’ in the broadest sense of the word: ‘we’ are ‘all’, there is no ‘others’ or ‘them’.” To reach both audiences, they publish in both Arabic and Spanish.

As with all national identities, successful minority- and regional-language media both reflect and give voice to the point where these identities intersect and, in the digital world, need to manage these competing pulls. Many note that this goes beyond meeting information needs. It’s about carrying forward the language and culture, of contributing to the shape and identity of the community itself. As Jørgen Møllekær of [Flensborg Avis](#) says of their biggest challenge: “To keep together the coherence within the Danish minority in Germany.”

While minority- and regional-language media have an inherently strong understanding of their audience, traditional media in transition have to think about how digital changes will

impact their audience both by reaching a changing -- often younger -- generation and by shifting the traditional consumption in print by an older, more conservative generation.

One of Finland's leading Swedish language papers, [Hufvudstadsbladet](#), (one of 10 in the country) says its average audience age is close to 60. To expand, they launched a parallel youth-focused newspaper and introduced special subscription deals for schools and university students.

In Spain, [El Diari de Catalunya](#) say that their current audience is older Catalan speakers, both nationally and rooted in the region. "Our goal," they say, "would be to reach young people and the new population."

The main audience of Hungarian-language newspaper [Új Szó](#) in Slovakia lives in the traditional Hungarian-speaking region of the country. The paper's general manager, Edita Slézaková, says:

**“ Our readers are not able to read about regional problems in the national papers because who cares what is happening in a small city or a small village or so? But we are writing about the good examples, about the problems, about the mayors, which new rules are prepared for the people of the village, about the activities, the culture activities, which is very important. Our position is to be between the authorities and our readers, we try to explain what is going on. Our main issues are the regional politics and topics.”**

The challenge for [Új Szó](#) is to find ways to expand and serve new audiences in digital, while continuing to serve their shrinking print readership. Given that the Hungarian minority in Slovakia makes up 460,000 people, and the paper currently sells between 13,000 and 17,000 copies per day, there is potential to grow its audience substantially. This would involve finding ways to listen and understand the needs of younger and other sections of the community currently not served by the paper and finding ways to serve these needs in formats and on platforms where these potential audiences gather. In this sense they are caught in the classic innovator's dilemma, existing in print but needing to make a transformational shift to a digital future where their journalism can find new people.

In South Tyrol, [Dolomiten](#) has long acted as the local news voice in the regional (German) language. Like all daily papers, its audience is aging, and it is relying on experiments with its on-line arm to draw younger readers.

Digital distribution inevitably changes the audience. Once a media outlet ceases to be constrained by geography, it can reach outside its core city or region into a broader voice. For example:

- ⇒ The German-language newspaper [Der Nordschleswiger](#) in southern Denmark has transformed from an information source for the small German-speaking community in Denmark into a German-language voice for the border communities. In parallel, the Danish-language news outlet in Flensburg on the German-side of the border has similarly transformed into a Danish-language voice on the border.
  
- ⇒ In Romania, [the Allgemeine Deutsche Zeitung für Rumänien](#) is aiming to match its reporting to the German-speaking community in the country with reporting on Romania to German speakers across Europe (including German-speaking Romanians now living in Germany).
  
- ⇒ The digital native Catalan-language [VilaWeb](#) has contributed to the demand for news and information in language for their community.

Sometimes these changes are planned. Sometimes they happen by serendipity. Some have been hurried on by COVID-19, others have been held back. For example, pandemic-related borders produced a demand for a voice for border communities that could address their particular needs on each side of the line. Meanwhile, at Flensburg Avis, for example, having staff work from home has delayed the “digital first” shift, although they are preparing to implement a new working culture from early 2022.

# Products and distribution

Traditionally, print newspapers have been the most effective medium to reach communities, particularly those living in discrete and relatively compact regions. However, this has been disrupted by the decline in newspaper distribution networks including rising postage costs and fewer news kiosks in smaller communities. For example, changes in postage have meant that Hufvudstadsbladet has found it increasingly difficult to reach the Swedish-speaking communities spread along the coast of Finland, with distribution about one-third of total costs. The flipside of this has meant that other papers such as Der Nordschleswiger have broken even on costs by moving to digital only (except for a small print fortnightly print run).

It can be both expensive and a managerial challenge to maintain a daily print product parallel with digital distribution. Martxelo Otamendi from the Basque-language masthead [Berria](#) points to the importance of bringing the journalists along on the journey, to develop digital journalism skills while continuing to produce the only Basque-language print newspaper that services the region.

To pull readers to its web page, Dolomiten/Südtirol Online ([stol.it](#)) uses push messages, short information posts on Facebook, Twitter, and radio advertising.

Trieste-based Slovenian-language masthead [Primorski Dnevnik](#) says its most valued service is the early-morning home delivery service. “The service is expensive, but brings a strong loyalty,” the organisation points out. However, costs restrict delivery to potential readers outside the paper’s core area. The newspaper says this calls for a new digital marketing strategy.

As Slovak post is raising its prices for Saturday delivery, Hungarian language newspaper Új Szó has been forced to abandon their Saturday print edition for a PDF version, delivered to readers by email: “We try to collect email addresses from our readers to start sending them content as a PDF. But from the 8,000 subscribers we only have 1,400 email addresses. The readers are older people from small villages, and they do not have the technical equipment or knowledge to read news online”, says the newspaper’s editor, Edita Slézaková.



The flipside of this has meant that other papers such as Der Nordschleswiger have broken even on costs by moving to digital only (except for a small print fortnightly print run).

Meeting the competing demands of print and digital investment within scarce resources can trap mastheads with aging audiences. The challenge for minority language media dependent on these audiences is how to take them along on the digital transition. Danish-German title Der Nordschleswiger found it most practical to visit individual readers who were struggling with the new digital experience, to walk them through the change. As transitioning (particularly older) readers to new digital products is such a large challenge shared by many, it demands innovative design thinking to find ways to support this.

In the transition, organizations have had to grapple with a product-thinking approach to move beyond a simple transfer of newspaper content onto a web page. Apart from PDF editions as a tool to ease transition, they have had to consider whether social media platforms can be used effectively as distribution channels to push content or as engagement tools to pull readers to the web page. Each organisation needs to continue to consider which platform works best to find their audiences, although this may vary from language to language and country to country. Baynana says that Twitter is the most useful social media platform for their journalism. Der Nordschleswiger, taking advantage of the new online reach, has created new products for parents that can be found via online search, as a way to reach and engage new audiences.

Others have embraced email newsletters. Vicent Partal, director of Catalan-language VilaWeb, says they use the email relationship to build membership. At 10 pm (early for their audience, says Partal), members receive a subscriber-only newsletter with the full content of the next day's newspaper. They are also exploring how people (members, potential members, non-paying subscribers) react to specific subjects such as finance, politics, or science.

Tied in with rethinking the product is the challenge of mobile. Few of the minority-language media have shifted to the mobile-centred thinking that will be needed to reach younger audiences. Says Partal:

**“ The big change is that people are on mobiles, not on the computers, especially at night. So, you must focus on mobile.”**

# Business models

Minority- and regional-language media have (like all media) suffered from the shift of advertising from news-related publications to the digital platforms. While mass media in national (or global) languages have been able to hold onto some advertising, media appealing to local or sub-national communities have lacked the scale to appeal to advertisers.

Some (such as Der Nordschleswiger) have already abandoned ads. Others, like VilaWeb, are on an ad-free journey replaced with community-sourced funding (already 70 percent of turnover).

There is, perhaps, potential for others to rethink the relationship with potential advertisers, to use community engagement to reach advertisers who want to be seen to be supporting the minority community through sponsorship or partnership arrangements. This potentially changes the relationship with the business community to bring them into the community and offers opportunities to create new products or areas of journalism.

Like much of the smaller media, minority-language media generally lack the scale to build a purely transactional subscription base. Almost all media pointed to a lack of a culture of paying online for subscriptions, although as VilaWeb's Partal noted, the take-up of streaming services like Netflix is habituating audiences (particularly younger audiences) to pay. Organizations can build reader revenues through a paying membership/supporter base, perhaps with special benefits. VilaWeb, for example, has a free-to-access web site, but provides specialist insider emails for about 20,000 paying supporters that bring the audience inside the journalism process and create community.

Berria also has a well-developed [membership program](#) with a number of benefits (plus quite a simple payment structure):

Minority media often depend for funding from either (or both) the state in which they are based or the regional/local government where their language is dominant, usually for general running-costs. Der Nordschleswiger, for example, receives support from both

Denmark and Germany, while Hufvudstadsbladet receives funding from the Finnish government.

Government funding, however, can create risks for media independence. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whose FIDESZ party already exerts control over most mainstream media in Hungary, has strongly sought to influence the Hungarian-speaking communities abroad through citizenship and funding initiatives. Media is another avenue of possible influence.

**“ This creates quite a huge problem because Orbán, or his government is supporting quite strongly the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. But if your company or you as a person are negative towards Orbán, then you are not able to get this support”**

- Edita Slézaková, the editor-in-chief of Új Szó.

# Journalism in competition for attention

In a time of information abundance delivered without barriers online, minority and regional media face both threats and opportunities for the attention of their audience. Apart from the sheer volume of non-news and social media, these threats include:

- ⇒ **From media in neighbouring countries** where the minority language in question is the majority language. For example, in Finland, Swedish speakers can now access Swedish-language news from Sweden directly. This can cause tension in emerging proto-authoritarian states (such as Hungary) where news from the main language country is shaped in the interests of that government.
- ⇒ **From dominant-language media:** Most citizens (particularly emerging generations) are fluent both in their primary language and in the national language and may find their information needs better met in that language.
- ⇒ **From community-focused social media**, such as Facebook groups or, on a more limited scale, WhatsApp.

To compete, minority- and regional-language media need to seize the opportunity of their unique offering with a journalism that compels attention from their audience(s). That calls for a journalism that engages the audience throughout the editorial process, from conception to consumption, generating a feedback loop that links the journalism and the community together.

As Vicent Partal from VilaWeb says, “The community is a big new newsroom for us”:

“*...every Monday we have a pack of two, three stories for every day of the week that we will work on. And all these stories we send to the subscribers, to the community. And we ask them for help. For instance, do you know someone that we must talk*

***with? Or did you think this is wrong and we must change something? What will happen this week?”***

Others use more structured questionnaires. Tommy Westerlund from Hufvudstadsbladet says they survey their members two or three times a year:

**“ We are asking our readers what they like, what they don't like, what they would like to have more of, and what they would like to have less of. We take the temperature from our readers. We really care to get to know how the readers see our paper all the time, from month to month.”**

The Danish-language Flensburg Avis organizes town halls three or four times a year to hear what its community wants to have reported.

Dolomiten in South Tyrol leverages the lessons it takes from online engagement to shape its journalism: “We learn from our online channels which topics get bigger attention than others and discuss whether these topics should be presented in a more prominent way. And we introduced Stol+: Additional, paid content with access on the free online platform. Collaboration between print and online (first of all video journalism) brought changes in planning and presentation.”

Many of the minority and regional media interviewed for this project discovered the imperative of this sort of engaging journalism through meeting community demands for information around COVID-19. For example, Der Nordschleswiger found itself the go-to for questions about how the border between Denmark and Germany worked under COVID restrictions.

Digital offers a different and rich relationship with readers.

Gwyn Nissen from Der Nordschleswiger says they were surprised to see how their readership expanded when they transitioned to digital in 2020 and found they “really had a role of connecting and combining the people in the area”. While they have reached up to 43,000 readers in one day, they regularly attract between 12,000 and 15,000 readers daily.

**“ There is a lot of talk about where the newspaper's gone, people cannot see it lying around. What we've seen is how big this group of native Danish speakers who are able to understand our news is. I know that because I've got a great network of Danish friends and business networks. I can hear them saying, 'Oh, I've read that on your website. Or we've seen it there. You can see it via Facebook or Twitter or whatever.’”**

Minority and regional media are leveraging their community engagement to take on fake news. Tommy Westerlund from Finland's Swedish-language Hufvudstadsbladet says: “With all the fake news that are now around us, suddenly people see that it's important to get real news that you can rely on and trust. So, I think it's turning around again and then we'll be kind of a winner.”

Vicent Partal says VilaWeb lost subscribers who were attracted to crazy theories out there about COVID. But they followed their responsibility to journalism, saying to readers: “Part of our job is to listen to you, but our job is not following you.” They pushed back against fake COVID news with special newsletters and articles.

# Insights and needs analysis

Organizations that serve minority- and regional-language media are all on the journey of digital transition but find themselves at many different stations. Organizations are challenged by cultural constraints and the difficulty of managing change, taking their readers from print to digital, finding new ways to reach new people, developing a digital media business model, and sometimes just knowing the technology or what might work in the digital space.

Conscious of these differences, all organizations would benefit from opportunities to rethink their mission in a time of change, to understand their audience needs, and to develop the skills to meet these needs:

- ⇒ A design focused re-thinking (through targeted research and workshopping) of who their audience is or could be, and what their journalism could be. From this, they can develop a focused understanding of the job they need to be doing to meet audience (and potential audience) needs.
- ⇒ Filling a knowledge/skill gap in audience research, beyond that traditionally done for advertisers, to better understand the market they could serve, and the needs of the audiences within each market, particularly new audiences.
- ⇒ Build a deepened understanding of segments in changing community structures with deep engagement (town halls, online surveys) with the communities they serve on needs and wants of different segments.
- ⇒ Training in digital journalism skills for newsrooms in transition, including training in social media as both a distribution channel and a pull to the core publication.
- ⇒ Training in product development skills to provide a range of interconnected offerings that reach the varied parts of the community where they are.

- ⇒ Developing structures that encourage sharing of experiences both within the minority media network and with external media outlets, through mentoring, partnerships, regular talks and “Ask me anything” sessions, and workshops.
  
- ⇒ Find ways to share knowledge and build skills in developing new revenue strategies and business models suited to minority media and their audiences, which helps pivot from reliance on advertising to diversified income streams, including reader revenues.
  
- ⇒ Develop standard charters of editorial independence to protect organizational integrity dependent on government funding from governmental interference.
  
- ⇒ Assistance with building capacity to lead change management and culture change.