

(Re)creating Welsh-Speaking Communities in Facebook: An Initial Investigation¹

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Abstract

The Internet can play a significant role in minority language maintenance and revitalization (Cunliffe, 2007). Because it provides opportunities for a low-cost entry for media production and user-generated content that is largely free of state control, the Internet has become an important medium for both the production and consumption of minority language content. One of the minority languages that has an active community on the Internet is Welsh.

Figures indicate that 28.4% of the population of Wales aged three and over (around 800,000 people) has at least one language skill in Welsh (Aitchison & Carter, 2004). Despite the fact that practically all Welsh speakers possess native-speaker fluency in English, more than 270,000 people in Wales use Welsh on a daily basis (Welsh Language Board, 2006).

Scholars have claimed that the Internet has particular significance for Wales in terms of strengthening existing communities and creating new communities (Mackay & Powell, 1998). As such, the idea of "community" is evoked in much of the discourse surrounding the Welsh language online. For example, Parsons (2000) argues that contact with the virtual Welsh community is leading to a strengthening of Welsh identity among the diaspora in the USA. Although the importance of the Internet to the Welsh language has been recognized by scholars (e.g., Davies, 2005), organizations with an interest in the language (e.g., Cunliffe & Honeycutt, 2008), and Welsh speakers themselves (e.g., Honeycutt, 2008), the use of Welsh on the Internet remains largely unexplored, and significant questions about the impact of Welsh language provision on the language's use and status remain unanswered.

Currently, social networking sites like Facebook are proving very popular on the Internet and are attracting Welsh speakers. Facebook currently presents an English language interface, and much of the content is also in English. In common with other

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Internet applications (e.g., blogs, Honeycutt, 2008), Welsh speakers are adopting and adapting Facebook so that they can use it through the medium of Welsh.

This paper presents an initial investigation of the current use of the Welsh language in Facebook, operating within the limits of publicly available information (the "Wales" network, open groups with unrestricted membership, and publicly available information about closed groups). Specifically the investigation focused on the existence of groups using Welsh and the connections between these groups.

Groups were identified through a combination of methods: searches on key words (e.g., "Cymraeg," the Welsh language); identification of groups associated with organizations known to use or promote the Welsh language (e.g., Welsh medium schools); and groups which are listed on the profiles of some known Welsh language bloggers. Basic information was gathered about the use of Welsh and other languages in these groups, the range of topics, and the levels of activity and membership. The interconnectivity between groups was then explored using Social Network Analysis by following the "Related Groups" information to map out a network of groups based on common membership. This reveals not only connections between Welsh speaking groups, but also connections with English speaking groups, as might be expected given a bilingual user population.

The Welsh language is just one of many minority languages being used in Facebook. This initial investigation has examined how Facebook is being adapted by Welsh speakers and how Welsh speakers are adapting to Facebook. It has also provided an overview of the Welsh speaking community that is emerging on Facebook. However, more work is required. Future research should explore connections between the Welsh speaking community on Facebook and other Welsh speaking Internet places—blogs, websites, forums, and other social networking sites—in order to better understand the virtual Welsh-speaking community as a whole. A wider investigation will also contribute to increased understanding of how minority language speakers can employ social network sites to promote their language and culture on the Internet and what impact these sites can have on the use and status of these languages.

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