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## **Mediacentric spaces and physical spaces in minority language use. A case study.**

Gorka Salces-Alcalde, Josu Amezaga

### **Abstract**

The changes that have been taking place in recent decades in the communications field are modifying the latter's relation to physical space. The dynamic of languages is one of the areas where this modification might involve social transformations. The question of minority languages holds a special interest within this field given that, in numerous cases and for different reasons, the density of speakers in a physical territory is one of the main obstacles that these languages face for their survival. It is with good reason that the concept of 'physical breathing space' proposed by Joshua Fishman refers to the need of these languages to have a dense space available to them, where the language's reproduction is in some way guaranteed. This article sets out the hypothesis that the mass media can be the basis for constructing a communication space that, since it does not directly depend on a territory, is not dependent on its linguistic density. In support of this hypothesis we employ a case study (the press in Basque language), in which both quantitative and qualitative techniques are applied.

### **Keywords**

Minority language media, regional or minority languages, physical breathing space, communication space, Basque language

### **Introduction**

Numerous studies on transnational and diasporic communication refer to the importance of constructed communication spaces that go beyond continuous physical territory (Karim 2003). These spaces are essentially based on traditional mass media (disseminated on a planetary scale thanks to satellite and/or internet) and new online practices. Obviously, speaking of communication spaces involves speaking of linguistic spaces (Gifreu 2009). Thus, in order to understand what is happening with these non-territorial communication spaces it is helpful to understand the dynamics faced by linguistic communities; especially those less favoured in the distribution of linguistic hegemony, namely: minority languages.

In this article we will defend the hypothesis that the mediacentric spaces can act as breathing spaces (Fishman 1991) for minority languages in contexts in which the dispersion of the speakers does not allow the existence of spaces with high linguistic density, as the concept of physical breathing spaces suggests. We understand thus ‘mediacentric spaces’ as those spaces of communication based on media (Cunningham 2001). By ‘physical breathing spaces’ we refer to the Joshua Fishman’s concept, meaning those spaces with a high density of speakers where a language is used and transmitted in an almost natural way – without the intervention of a clear linguistic policy – which are fundamental for the survival of minority languages (op. cit.). Clarifying that hypothesis will thus make possible to deal more suitably with the challenges faced by languages whose speakers are highly dispersed in a territory. This is of special interest in an age when, on the one hand, mediacentric spaces are more important than ever; and, on the other, dispersion is one of the greatest threats to the survival of many minority languages.

## **Methodology**

With this goal we will first briefly present the Joshua Fishman’s concept of physical breathing space applied to languages, and then explain how some mediacentric communication spaces are constructed beyond the territory. In order to do so we will base on the contributions of studies on transnational communication. Next we will proceed to a case study about the press in Basque language. In this case study, firstly, quantitative data will be analysed in order to compare the relationship between the density of speakers and the rate of circulation of the press in this language in the different sociolinguistic zones. This will help us to draw some conclusions about the lack of correspondence between the two variables. After that, we will move to a qualitative analysis of 40 in-depth interviews carried on Basque-speakers from different sociolinguistic backgrounds and areas. The interviewees were asked about their experience with Basque language media (opinions, attitudes and behaviour), and were selected according to several factors (age, gender, fluency on Basque, mother tongue and others), following a snowball technique. After conducting the interviews, their transcriptions were codified using NVivo9 software in order to register, among other questions, the participants’ main motivations with respect to the mass media in Basque. Finally, we draw some conclusions about the relationship between linguistic density and media usage among scattered speakers of the language.

## **Physical breathing spaces and non-territorial communication spaces**

A significant portion of the work done on the use of minority languages gives a great importance to the chance, for speakers of the minority, to contact other speakers in order to use the language. In our opinion, this idea is usually combined with a *vis-à-vis* model of relationship, where the physical proximity of the speakers is a key factor for the linguistic practice. That is why maps showing the density of the speakers in the areas where the language is present become so popular when explaining the situation of a

given minority language. Indeed, it is supposed that a higher density of speakers (meaning a higher proportion of speakers among the whole population) facilitates the usage of the language in *vis-à-vis* situations.

In the case of European minority languages for example, we are accustomed to seeing maps that colour the density of the speakers of a language by area. They clearly show what in Irish is called *Gaeltacht*, and in Basque *arnasguneak*: that is, places where a high density of speakers gives them more choices for the normal use and transmission of the language. These maps show the physical spaces in which a language appears stronger, at least in terms of *vis-à-vis* relationships.

As an example, in the Map 1 we can observe the presence of those areas where there is a high density of Basque-speakers.

*Map 1: percentage of Basque language speakers by area<sup>1</sup>*

[map1\_basque\_density.png]

In parallel with this assumption the renowned sociolinguistic Joshua Fishman, when talking about language transmission, remarks the importance of physical proximity in order to ensure the maintenance of the language, and he mentions the concept of ‘breathing space’:

*Every pro-RLS [Reverse Language Shift] movement must strive to provide physical breathing-space for its constituency, demographically concentrated space where Xish can be on its own turf, predominant and unharassed. Such spaces may appear abnormal or atypical vis-à-vis the outside, non-Xish surrounding reality; but vis-à-vis internal Xish reality, such spaces become potential oases of authenticity and centers of increased cultural self-regulation that seek to counteract the physical dislocation that minority life is so commonly afflicted with (Fishman 1991, p.58).*

The concept of physical breathing space as potential oases for minority languages does not seem to be very popular in the English or Spanish scientific literature, but it has become very influential in the Basque context (Bengoetxea 2012; Zalbide & Cenoz 2008), not only in the academic field but also in the politics of language. These areas of high density are thus considered as crucial for the use and reproduction of the Basque language.

However, from our point of view the importance given to the physical space for the dynamics of the language should not make us forget that the languages are not only used in *vis-à-vis* situations. Even if there is not a clear agreement among scientists about

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1 Source: The data on percentages of Basque-speakers used throughout the article are taken from the Basque Institute of Statistics (EUSTAT 2011), Institute of Statistics of Navarre (Instituto de Estadística de Navarra 2011) and the Sociolinguistic Survey (Basque Government 2012). They are based on census data and include the whole population above the age of 2 years. The data for the provinces on the French side are an estimate from the Sociolinguistic Survey, since there is no census data for Basque-speakers in those provinces.

the role that media can play in the language shift (Fishman himself does not give much importance to this factor) (Jones 2013), both the several efforts by pro-RLS movements and linguistic policy makers in order to promote media in minority languages and some significant academic contributions (Cormack & Hourigan 2007; Gifreu 2009) suggest that media must be considered not only as tools for the vitality of the language but also as spaces where language is used –or not used.

Moreover, in an age when the role of physical proximity in determining social relationships is declining (Wellman 2002), we are forced to ask whether we should consider that the linguistic reproduction and conflict not only take place in physical spaces but also, and increasingly, mediacentric spaces or those of online communication. Even Fishman, when explaining his concept, advises us that “*the disadvantages of physical dispersion can be somewhat compensated for by modern technology*” (op. cit., 58).

The existence of communication spaces not linked to a territory is consubstantial to the existence of resources enabling people to communicate on a massive level over a long distance. To the extent that mass media have been increasing their range (in the case of television and radio, for example, moving from terrestrial to satellite broadcasting; in that of the printed press, from paper to internet), communication spaces have also been widening; and this has transformed the relation between communication and territory. This capacity, combined with other phenomena of a social character (such as migratory movements, for example), has led many authors to observe how phenomena that were previously linked to territorial spaces (dependent on the limited range of communication formats) are now taking place on a planetary scale: concepts such as transnationalism (Vertovec 1999), global sphericules (Cunningham 2001; Gitlin 1998), local private spaces (Slade 2006) and a long etcetera show the interest of the academia towards these changes, and how non-territorial media become the support for social relations between scattered populations. Amongst the different approaches analysing the dislocation between territory and communication, it is the perspective of geolinguistic spaces (Author2 2007; Sinclair et al. 1996) that most interests us at the present moment, precisely because its analysis focuses on language as the agglutinating element in a space supported by media (satellite television in the case of the works cited). The idea of speakers of a language who are dispersed as a result of emigration over territories where other languages are hegemonic (such as the case of the Latinos in the USA or the Turks in Europe), but who are united by mass media in their own language, is of unquestionable interest for posing the following question: could the same phenomenon be taking place on smaller scales, involving smaller linguistic communities, and with a dispersion that is more linguistic than territorial – that is, the dispersion of the speakers of a minority language amongst the speakers of the hegemonic language?

The issue of the existence of non-territorial communication spaces seems to us to be especially pertinent in the case of non-hegemonic languages, whether these are Immigration Minority Languages (IML) or Regional Minority Languages (RML) (Extra & Yagmur 2002). In the first case, the maps made by Eric Fisher on the linguistic uses of the Twitter social medium show, on the one hand, that the linguistic space of this

virtual social network, taken on a large scale, broadly coincides with the physical spaces where a language is official or habitually used (Fisher 2011); usually the space of the nation-state where the language is official. However, on a smaller scale, where the units of analysis are big cities and not national territories, a great linguistic diversity can be observed in the same geographic space. Then several languages coincide at the same time and the same place, creating thus the basis for a possible interaction between the users of each language.

In the case of the RML, due to different reasons (interior migrations, urbanisation of rural zones, policy of revitalising the language and others), the greatest density of speakers does not always correspond with the greatest absolute number of speakers of a minority language. This is why the maps showing density of speakers can be misleading if they are used for trying to indicate the spaces where a language is strongest in numerical terms. In the case of Welsh, for example, according to the estimations of the 2013 census 59 % of Welsh-speakers live in areas where the density does not reach 30 %, and only 21 % live in areas with a density over 50 % (Stats Wales 2013). The area where the most speakers are concentrated is Cardiff, where Welsh-speakers make up 18 % of the population. In Scotland, 75 % of Gaelic speakers live in zones where the density does not exceed 6 %; the remaining 25% is concentrated in two areas with percentages of 41 % and 52 % of Gaelic-speakers (National Records of Scotland 2011) . In the Basque Country, the bilingual Basque-speaking population is highly dispersed amongst the population that is monolingual in the majority language. Paradoxically, nowadays this dispersion is due above all to the advance of knowledge of the Basque language, thanks both to its introduction in the school system and its wide social acceptance (Others, Author\_2 2010). As a result, at present 60 % of Basque-speakers live in towns where they are still a minority, that is, less than 50 %. This dispersion even affects the family nucleus, since while 30 years ago two out of every three Basque-speakers lived in households where all members spoke the language, it is now only one in every three (EUSTAT 2006).

Taking into account these situations of dispersion of speakers, we must ask whether the low density of speakers in a given physical space affects the uses of the language in the mediacentric spaces in the same way that it seems to do regarding *vis-à-vis* relationships. This seems to us to be a key question, since the answer could guide linguistic policies for revitalising minority languages with respect to mass media.

### **Case study: the press in Basque language**

There are two types of general information press in Basque language: national and local. At the national level (that is to say including the seven provinces of the Basque Country) there is only one daily in Basque, *Berria*<sup>2</sup>. The daily print run of this 48 pages' newspaper is around 12,000 copies, of which a little over 9,000 are delivered to homes

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<sup>2</sup> Even if we consider it as a daily, *Berria* is not published on Mondays.

by subscription, and the rest are put on sale in news-stands. At the local level, however, there is a great range of publications. According to Bidegain and others (Bidegain et al. 2013) there are 52 local<sup>3</sup> papers, varying from those which publish five items per week to those which publish every four months of less.

An analysis of the circulation of the press in the different counties suggests us that the density of Basque-speakers in each zone seems to be determinant for the existence or not of supply of local press in that language. Indeed, there is barely any local press in Basque in zones where density falls below a third of the population. It seems that as Moring and others note, a critical level of ethnolinguistic vitality (EV), which implies among others the demographic factor, is required to ensure a minimum of media supply (Moring et al. 2011).

This fact can be observed in Graph 1. The X axis shows the different counties of the Basque Country, labelled with their percentage of Basque-speakers.<sup>4</sup> The Y axis shows the number of pages printed monthly by the local press and by *Berria*, divided by the number of Basque-speakers of the district. Together with the remarkable presence of the local press in the district of Debagoiena (marked with a 63 % of speakers' density), the almost non-existence of this type of press can be observed in districts with a lower density of Basque-speakers.

*Graph 1: circulation of local press (number of pages printed monthly per Basque-speaker) according to the district's linguistic density<sup>5</sup>*

[graph1\_press\_circulation.png]

Apart from the importance of a minimal density of speakers in order to ensure the supply of press in Basque, a second conclusion can be drawn from the analysis of the data of circulation. When supply of press in Basque is provided (which in the case of the local press is the case of most of the counties where density is above a third of the population, and in the case of the national press includes the whole territory), it seems that density is not a factor that explains the rate of circulation of the papers. Thus we can find similar rates of circulation of the local press in counties with density around 40-50 % and counties with density about 70-80 %. Even, if we have a look at the circulation rates of the national newspaper *Berria* along the whole Basque Country, we observe quite high rates of circulation in counties with low density of speakers.

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the local media analysed target a single town, while others target a district. By district we refer to a level that in a British context could be compared to the county. In the Basque Country, a district usually coincides with a valley.

<sup>4</sup> In this case we consider the whole of the Northern Basque Country as a single district, due to the difficulty to obtain detailed data about speakers in each village or county of this part under French administration.

<sup>5</sup> Source: elaborated by the authors based on Bidegain (Bidegain et al. 2013), data provided by *Berria*, and other sources. For the account of number of pages published the following variables were taken into account: frequency of publication, number of pages, size (A3 or A4), and total circulation of different papers in each county (sum of town and county level papers).

It could be argued that by combining the circulation of local and national press in each county would show a clear difference of rates between counties with low density and counties with high density. Areas with a density over 36 % (most of them having the supply of local press) have a total circulation higher than areas with a density below 36 % (most of them lacking any supply of local press). In our opinion this analysis would lead to the wrong conclusion that the density of speakers does affect the ratio of circulation of the press in Basque as a whole (local and national). We consider it as a wrong conclusion for two reasons. On the one hand, if it is true that we can divide the counties in two blocks (density over and below 36 %) with different patterns of circulation, it is also true that into each block there is no correlation between the level of the density and the ratio of circulation. On the other hand, this analysis would be suitable only on the basis that local and national press might be combined to create a ratio of circulation of the press. However both types of publications are different enough as to consider them as something accumulative of comparable: half of them are published monthly or less than monthly, and only 5 out of 52 are published twice or more a week; their formats and contents vary greatly from one another, and hardly could be considered as rivals for a general information daily.

This is why from our understanding a deeper analysis of the circulation of the Basque-language newspaper *Berria* can shed some light in this respect, since it will allow us to work on a town level and avoid the bias that the combination of such different publications could cause. For this analysis we begin with the data on the newspaper's circulation in each municipality in the Basque Country. In Graph 2 we have compared the following parameters: rate of density of Basque-speakers (X axis, expressed in percentage of speakers over the total population); rate of circulation of *Berria* (Y axis, expressed in number of copies per 1,000 Basque-speakers); and number of copies sold (expressed in the size of each bubble). As can be seen in the graph, *Berria*'s circulation rate by municipality is not dependent on the linguistic density of Basque language. In fact, the newspaper's highest rates of circulation are found in towns with a very low linguistic density. While it is true that in the most extreme cases these are municipalities with few Basque-speaking inhabitants (which means that the circulation rate for each issue is really high), we must note that a statistical analysis shows that the correlation ( $R^2$ ) between the newspaper's circulation rate and the rate of linguistic density is practically nil (0.0101); even if the analysis were restricted to bigger population centres, with over 20,000 inhabitants, the correlation would continue to be weak (0.3338). On the contrary, the correlation between the newspaper's circulation and the absolute number of Basque-speakers in each municipality is very high (0.9030). This seems to demonstrate that the circulation of *Berria* depends on the number of speakers in each towns, not on the density of them among the whole population.

*Graph 2: circulation of the newspaper Berria by municipalities, according to linguistic density, the newspaper's rate of circulation, and absolute circulation, Basque Country*<sup>6</sup>

[graph2\_berria\_circulation.png]

The non-existence of a statistical correlation between linguistic density and the circulation of *Berria* if all the towns are considered, as well as the weakness of the correlation if analysis is restricted to urban areas of over 20,000 inhabitants, should not be interpreted as a negative correlation (in which the index of circulation would be greater in zones with less density). Instead, it should be understood that linguistic density is not a determinant factor in the circulation of the Basque-language newspaper, neither negatively nor positively.

This contrasts with the importance of that factor in the use of Basque in *vis-à-vis* situations. Txillardegi and Isasi demonstrated the high correlation between the density and the usage in contexts where all the speakers of the minority language are bilinguals (minority/hegemonic language), thus the hegemonic language can be used as a *lingua franca* amongst all the participants (Txillardegi & Isasi Balantzategi 1994).

Given that press consumption implies an individualized use of the language (as it is based on the relation between the reader and the medium), and not a collective use (relation amongst several speakers), this means that lower linguistic density does not equally affect *vis-à-vis* interaction and mediated interaction. This can be seen in Table 1, which compares the data relating to linguistic density, use of Basque in the street, and the circulation rate of *Berria*, in the four provincial capitals of the Southern Basque Country. It can be clearly seen that the differences in the use of Basque in the street amongst cities according to their linguistic density are much greater than those found in the newspaper's circulation rate. Indeed, while the use of Basque in the street in the capital with the greatest density of speakers is 6 times higher than in the capital with the lowest density of speakers, the index of the newspaper's circulation is barely 1.3 times higher.

*Table 1: use of Basque in the street and circulation of Berria in the four provincial capitals of the Southern Basque Country*<sup>7</sup>

	% Basque-speakers	% Use of Basque in the street	Circulation of <i>Berria</i> per 1,000 speakers
<b>Iruñea</b>	11.63	2.70	16.15
<b>Gasteiz</b>	22.46	3.10	12.94

<sup>6</sup> Source: elaborated by the authors on the basis of data provided by the newspaper, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> We do not have data for use in the street for the provincial capitals of the Northern Basque Country. Source: VIª Medición de los Usos Lingüísticos en la Calle / VI Measuring of Language Usage in the Street (Soziolinguistika Klusterra 2012) and elaboration by the authors.

<b>Bilbo</b>	22.99	3.20	13.09
<b>Donostia</b>	40.59	15.90	21.40

This difference observed in the linguistic behaviour of the *vis-à-vis* relation and the circulation of *Berria* could well be explained by the intervention of many factors in the newspaper's circulation, not only linguistic ones. A particular percentage of the newspaper's circulation cannot therefore be attributed to a particular density of Basque-speakers. Parallel to this analysis and referring to media uses of immigrants in Western European contexts, some studies demolish the idea that the immigrant, due to the fact of being one, must have a preference for the media of his/her country of origin (Aksoy 2006; Aksoy & Robins 2003). Concretely, Aksoy suggests that immigrants with access to the media of two different public spheres (those of the society of reference/origin and those of the host society), choose one or the other more in accordance with a scheme of uses and gratifications than in accordance with supposed national loyalties. Transferring these conclusions to the terrain of minority languages, whose speakers, like immigrants in a host society, live in two different linguistic universes at the same time, we could deduce that these speakers also choose their media according to the gratifications that, in one or another language, are perceived from their use.

This approach would, however, clash in some cases with the approach of ethnolinguistic identity, according to which this latter also affects the use of media (Vincze & Moring 2013). Thus, in the case of minority languages Moring proposes the "strict preference condition" hypothesis, according to which, with equal conditions in the gratifications obtained from media, speakers of a minority language prefer media in that language as opposed to media in the hegemonic language. From our point of view, a correct interpretation of the weight of the ethnolinguistic identity in the uses of the media should consider that at least in the Basque case the ethnolinguistic identity cannot be assumed as a given factor for all the speakers as if they were a homogeneous group. The fact that over a third of the current Basque-speakers come from Spanish/French backgrounds and have learned the language as a second language at school can support this need of caution.

Having reached this point, it is important to go more deeply into some of the elements that appear associated with the use of media by dispersed speakers of minority languages. For this purpose we employ a qualitative analysis, which enables us to discover new factors that help in understanding that use and to construct new hypotheses.

### ***The media as a vital or breathing space***

As explained above, forty in-depth interviews were conducted throughout the Basque Country with Basque-speakers from different profiles. This sample is included in a broader work about the opinions, attitudes and behaviour of Basque-speakers towards media (Author1 2016).

In the same line as Fishman's proposal of the concept of breathing space as a milieu where minority language can be used more or less normally, some other authors have remarked the importance of the existence of certain minimum conditions in order to allow its use (Martinez de Luna 1996). These conditions basically correspond to the existence of a minimum of spaces and people with whom to practice the language, and act together with motivational factors (Sanchez Carrión 1987) which lead the bilinguals –even the unbalanced bilinguals- to choose the minority tongue.

According to our observations, facing the barriers posed by the non-existence of such minimum conditions, some of the interviewees use particular media in order not to lose Basque. In these cases, the national mass media – practically the only ones present in zones with a low density of Basque-speakers, where there is thus less opportunity to use the language – provide Basque-speakers living in areas with a clear predominance of monolingual Spanish or French-speakers with the possibility of having daily contact with the language. Such contact would be much more difficult to maintain without the media that are distributed throughout the Basque Country, since the scarcity of Basque-speakers in their immediate milieu forms an obstacle to their having a daily relationship with the language. In such a context, the mass media with a nationwide scope fulfil a key role in linguistic normalisation. They are the sole viable possibility for keeping alive the flame of a language they consider an integral part of their identity. In our sample, all the interviewees sharing this attitude are under 35 years and resident in zones with a low percentage of Basque-speakers; they learned Basque at school and carry out a large part of their media consumption in this language. This idea of the instrumental use of minority language media can reinforce the findings of some other research works (Moring et al. 2011), which have studied the function of Swedish press as a way to compensate the balance in competences (both ethnicity and linguistic) where one of the language is less used.

In the following fragment, the young man interviewed underscores that, in spite of *Berria*'s not providing him with the local details that he prioritizes, he continues reading this newspaper because it is his daily umbilical cord to Basque:

*Interviewer: That's why I'm saying that perhaps for you the offer in Basque is a lame one [due to the lack of local media].*

*Interviewee: There isn't one. There isn't one directly. Besides, we're not very happy with Gara, concretely we think that it doesn't mention the south of Navarre (...) For that I prefer Berria, which goes a bit more deeply into things, and moreover in Basque. Besides, I feel a need, since I don't use it, to at least read something. (...) That's why you look for something... in the first place so as not to lose Basque. Because I've been here for a couple of years and it's something I notice, it's hard.*

*(27 years, Deikaztehu, 3 % Basque-speakers).*

In the last sentence of the extract, the interviewee refers to the fact that after working for some time in Elizondo – a town in the north of Navarre with a high percentage of

Basque-speakers (72 %) – he returned to his town of origin, Deikaztelu, where the proportion of Basque-speakers is 3 %. This circumstance created great difficulties for him to be able to use Basque, hence his need to read *Berria* to maintain contact with the language.

This interviewee, besides the newspaper in question, also uses the radio station *Euskadi Irratia* (public, general-interest, in Basque, with a nationwide scope) with the same aims: to have available the possibility of using Basque in an adverse setting. This is not the only case we have found, and both media are also referred to in the same sense; in this other fragment, taken from a conversation with an inhabitant of Gordexola, a traditionally Spanish-speaking town in Biscay:

*Interviewee: I watch ETB1 and listen to the radio so as not to lose Basque; and so as not to lose the ability to read, I use Berria and Naiz.*<sup>8</sup>

*Interviewer: So above all you listen to the radio in Basque?*

*Interviewee: Yes, Euskadi Irratia (...) I listen to football matches with Athletic in Basque. Ultimately I use the radio to have another resource for not losing Basque, since I can't speak it in my milieu.*

*(34 years, Gordexola, 26 % Basque-speakers)*

According to this idea, the media seem to provide Basque-speakers who live in the geographical peripheries of the language with a connecting link to the linguistic community from which, although forming part of it, they might feel physically distant.

In other situations we also find media consumption that is more linked to the idea of uses and gratifications. Such is the case of a young man who gives priority to entertainment over news, which he satisfies by listening to the music station *Gaztea* (public, nationwide scope, in Basque, commercial music content, both Basque and international). In numerous cases, this station is the only link that Basque-speakers have with the language; a fact that they perceive and value:

*I speak Spanish with my father and mother; they make an effort to understand Basque but, in one way or another, it's my second language. And then, even though this is the Basque Country, you still don't hear Basque spoken in the streets, and I don't know... To me at least it seems strange to see people speaking Basque (...) I think that if I'd been born somewhere else, I'd have another level [of Basque] and a different life, because if you speak in Basque, you get involved in other activities, even with other people... I don't know, my life would be completely different. The milieu is fundamental.*

*(21 years, Portugalete, 20 % Basque-speakers)*

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<sup>8</sup> Web portal of the newspaper *Gara*, which, in spite of being a newspaper mainly written in Spanish, provides some content in Basque.

## Conclusions

If we understand communication spaces as sites where communication takes place, and that this occurs not only in *vis-à-vis* interactions but also through media and other devices, it is clear that we can speak of spaces that are more dependent on physical proximity – and therefore on the territory – and spaces that are less dependent on it. We must bear this premise firmly in mind if we wish to understand the present dynamic of languages, especially in the case of those whose speakers are dispersed over one or several territories, or amongst speakers of other languages. This situation is currently faced by a considerable number of minority languages. The implications of this increasingly felt phenomenon must be reflected in linguistic policies aimed at revitalising minority languages; such policies must consider mass media as a fundamental field of play.

Focusing on the case of the press in minority languages, our analysis suggests that the local press requires a minimum critical mass – in terms of density of speakers – to emerge and develop. At least in the Basque case, this can be deduced from the fact that there is barely any local press in Basque language in districts with a density below 30-40 %, while it is found in nearly all the districts with a density above that figure. However, we have also observed that while this appears to be a condition for the supply of media in the minority language, this is not a condition for its consumption. This is suggested by the circulation figures for the local press in zones with different density of speakers and for the newspaper *Berria* in all the zones. This confers a specific role on media that reach spaces beyond the territories with high ethnolinguistic vitality; that is to say, low density spaces where, in the Basque case and many others, a large number of speakers live.

It could be of interest for other cases to check if this condition of a threshold level of density of speakers is required to ensure a minimal supply of media in the minority language, both at local and national levels.

The qualitative analysis has enabled us to examine the experience of consumption of media in the minority language in territories where the possibilities of *vis-à-vis* interaction in that language is more limited due to the low density of speakers. According to the results obtained, such media appear as a connecting link to the language for scattered speakers, a possibility that some of them value. This refers us to the question, already mentioned, of consumption linked to ethnolinguistic identity. More quantitative studies are needed to measure the real scope of this factor. But observation of *Berria*'s circulation figures in non-Basque-speaking zones – which are similar to, and on occasion higher than, the figures for other, Basque-speaking zones – seems to suggest that it could be an element with a strong presence.

The dispersion of Basque-speakers is not only territorial but also sociolinguistic. This means that a large part of the speakers not only live in non-Basque-speaking territories, but many of them must also get along in immediate sociolinguistic milieux that are not Basque-speaking either: they proceed from non-Basque-speaking families and for them Basque is a second language (learned in childhood at school or in academies at an adult

age). Thus the idea of media that reach territories with a low density also serves for understanding the reach of media in non-territorial social spaces that are also low density. In order to address this question we need quantitative studies of the typology of media users (native speakers vs. speakers of a second language; regular speakers vs. sporadic speakers; etc.), information that we still do not have available. But in any case, the idea of media as a route for the linguistic integration of new speakers seems a plausible hypothesis (Author2 2012).

All of this leads to consideration of the media as shapers of communication spaces that can, to a certain extent, be considered authentic “vital spaces” or “breathing spaces” for minority languages, without the physical aspect that this concept specified in its origins. In the final instance, this connects with the idea that to understand social relations nowadays, it is indispensable to refer to mediated communications, not only through the traditional mass media, but also through other types of devices. The very transformation of the meaning of the term “social network” in recent years is clearly illustrative of this change. This must be borne in mind in all fields of the social sciences,<sup>9</sup> clearly including sociolinguistics and studies on communication in minority languages. Moreover, we should question the utility of the maps based on the density of speakers of a given language as the main –sometimes, almost the unique- tool to understand the vitality of such language, in an era when the use of language goes far beyond the *vis-à-vis* interactions.

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<sup>9</sup> The studies on transculturality (Robins 2006) are already situated in this new paradigm.

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