Identity, language, and new media: the Kurdish case

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Abstract This paper draws on theories that describe interrelationships between identity, language and the media to investigate how the Kurds utilise two forms of electronic media—satellite television and the Internet—to construct their identities. The data for this study is generated from four sources: a Kurdish satellite television channel (Kurdistan TV), a variety of Kurdish Internet sites, literature reflecting on the place of the new media among the Kurds, and informal interviews and personal communications with Kurdish media producers and audiences. Strategies including participant observation and online ethnography have been used to select data. Data analysis is informed by a critical discourse analytic approach that calls for examination of data at three levels: discourse practices, text, and socio-cultural contexts (Fairclough in Media discourse. Arnold, London, 1995). Findings suggest that the Kurdish language is held as one of the most important and salient manifestations of Kurdish identity. Satellite television and the Internet have magnified the symbolic role of the Kurdish language in defining Kurdishness. In addition, these new media have enabled Kurds from different regions and all walks of life to share and discuss cultural, social and political ideas and issues publicly and dialogically, and to construct and reconstruct their identities discursively with relative freedom and ease. The study also underlines significant differences between these two forms of new media in relation to identity construction and language use. Whereas satellite television seems to foster mutual intelligibility among the speakers of different Kurdish varieties the Internet tends to further diversify the language across alphabet and regional lines.

Keywords Minority language media · Kurdish · Language policy · Critical discourse analysis · Language and identity · Sociology of language

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It is widely accepted that language occupies a prominent place in discussions of national identity (Edwards 2009; Fishman 1989; Joseph 2004). Language is not only one of the most significant indexes of collective identity but also one of the prime means of constructing and reproducing that identity. This power of language is magnified by media such as television and the Internet (Fisk and Hartley 2003). Thus, in the age of technological revolution, it is nearly impossible to understand national identities adequately without investigating how communication technologies serve as catalysts for their (re)construction (Morley 1992). Informed by theories of language and identity (Edwards 2009; Joseph 2004), media studies (Madianou 2005; McLuhan 1962; Morley 1992) and the interdisciplinary research approach of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995; Wodak et al. 2009), this paper investigates the ways Kurds use a satellite television channel, Kurdistan TV (KTV), and the Internet to construct and reproduce their identities.

The Kurds are one case of a minority group whose language has been fractured into different dialects, alphabets, and statuses across four separate countries. While the Kurdish language gained official status in Iraq in 2003, it was completely banned in Turkey until 1992 and has only recently become somewhat tolerated (Olson 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas and Fernandes 2008). Kurdish has been tolerated in Iran since the 1979 revolution and it has been subjected to 'linguicide'[1] in Syria, especially since 1955 (Hassanpour et al. 1996). Nevertheless, today Kurdish is the main language of a dozen satellite television channels, thousands of websites, chat rooms, weblogs and social networking sites. However, besides Hassanpour's studies of MED-TV (1998, 2003a), there has been no in-depth investigation into the ways in which the Internet and satellite television are used by the Kurds and what implications these uses might have for the identities and languages of Kurdish people and Kurdistanis.[2] As will be demonstrated in this paper, the findings of this study suggest that the Kurdish language is held as one of the most important and salient manifestations of Kurdish identity. Satellite television and the Internet have magnified the symbolic, instrumental and constructivist roles of the Kurdish language in defining Kurdish identities. In addition, these new media have enabled Kurds from different regions and walks of life to share and discuss cultural, social and political ideas and issues publicly, and to construct and reconstruct their identities discursively with relative freedom and ease. The study also underlines significant differences between these two forms of new media in relation to identity construction and language use. Whereas satellite television seems to foster mutual intelligibility among the speakers of different Kurdish varieties, the Internet tends to further diversify the language across alphabet and regional lines.

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[1] Linguicide is defined as the eradication of languages. Linguicide is different from language death, the disappearance of languages, in that whereas the former is "an analogous concept to (physical) *genocide*", the latter is "an analogous concept to *natural death*" (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1996: 667; emphasis in original).

[2] The term Kurdistanis here refers to all who live in, are from, or share a sense of collective or/and national belonging to Kurdistan ("the land of the Kurds") regardless of their ethnicity or citizenship (i.e. Kurdistanis do not have to be ethnic Kurds). Kurdistanis could also come from diasporas.

Identity, language, and media

National identity denotes shared feelings of belonging to a cultural or national group as well as a shared awareness of differences from other groups and nationalities (Brubaker 2004; Billig 1995; Wodak et al. 2009). National identity is a social construct, but it has historical and ethnic roots (Smith 1998), even if such roots often are invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1988). Put differently, those involved in national identity construction use history, territory and landscapes, language and a great number of cultural and political symbols and myths as ways of strengthening national ties (Castells 2004; Wodak et al. 2009).

Among the components of national identity, language is of prime importance (Edwards 2009; Fishman 1989; Joseph 2004) even though an essentialist view of the link between language and national identity may at times not be desirable (May 2008). There are at least three reasons to underscore the significance of language in defining and constructing national identity. First, for the majority of people, especially minorities, language is one of the most salient markers of group identity (Kymlicka and Patten 2003; Phillipson et al. 1995). This is regarded as particularly true in the case of the Kurdish language (Kreyenbroek and Allison 1996; McDowall 2004; Vali 2003). A second reason is connected to the instrumentality of language. Kymlicka and Straehle (1999) suggest that "… democratic politics is politics in the vernacular. The average citizen only feels comfortable debating political issues in their own language" (p. 70). In other words, participation in the cultural, social and political life of a community depends on the degree of access average citizens have to their own language. Finally, it is primarily through language that other components of national identity are constructed (Bishop and Jaworski 2003; Wodak 2006). Billig (1995) has suggested that "[t]o have a national identity is to possess ways of talking about nationhood" (p. 8).

The power of language and discourse in identity construction is magnified by communication technologies that enable social actors to share and negotiate meanings, signs and discursive constructions of collective identities (Chouliaraki 1999; Madianou 2005). Morley (1992) has suggested that "the construction and emergence of national identities cannot properly be understood without reference to the role of communications technology" (p. 267). Communication technologies are central for the construction and dissemination of national identities especially in nations that lack states, that do not have their own public schools, ministries of culture, a military, or other national, state-sponsored and other identity-making institutions. McLuhan (1962) believed that print was the architect of nationalism, and Anderson (1991) illustrated that the first nation-states were imagined in print languages. More recently, research has shown that satellite television has been employed for the reconstruction of collective and national identities among peoples without a state of their own such as the Aboriginals in Canada (Hartley 2004), the Welsh in the UK (Jones 2007), and the Māori in New Zealand (Lysaght 2009).

Similar to satellite television, the Internet also possesses a paradoxical quality that is both globalizing and localizing at the same time (Straubhaar 2002). While the Internet is seen as an agent of cultural globalization (Appadurai 1996), it is also viewed as the most accessible, inexpensive, interactive, individual-empowering

medium that is very suitable for minorities and diasporic groups (see Karim 2003). Sociolinguists such as Fishman (2001) have been sceptical about the overall positive role of the media in maintaining and developing minority languages and identities, whereas others like Crystal (2006) have seen the Internet as cultivating them. Examples of identity construction through Internet can be found with the Imazighen people from North Africa (Almasude 1999), Eritreans (Bernal 2006), the Māori from New Zealand (Muhamad-Brandner 2009), and the Welsh (Honeycutt and Cunliffe 2010). The Internet also seems to be suitable for engendering language diversity and fostering lesser-used and smaller language communities (Danet and Herring 2007) because, more than print, radio and television, the Internet can bypass state and/or market regulations and constraints (Poster 1999). The case of representations by linguistic minorities in the new media can be further exemplified in the context of the Kurds and Kurdistan.

Kurdish identity, language, and media

Kurdish national identity emerged at the turn of the twentieth century when it became evident that Kurdish ethnicity, culture, political aspirations, and languages had been denied or suppressed, first by the dominant Turkish, Arab (i.e. Iraqi and Syrian) and Persian nationalist ideologies, and then by their respective states, established in the aftermath of World War I (Vali 1998, 2003). Each state started to rule over a part of Kurdistan. Already divided across geographical, political and linguistic lines, Kurdish identity became increasingly fragmented after the final division of Kurdistan. The dynamics and patterns of Kurdish identity formation began to be determined, not only by internal factors, but also by different nation-building policies and practices of the states straddling Kurdistan (Vali 1998). With respect to language, for example, under the influence of modern Turkish, northern Kurds started to write Kurdish in the Latin-based alphabet whereas southern and eastern Kurds (from Iran and Iraq) continued to use an Arabic-based alphabet. Iraqi Kurds, following Arabic, started to call Austria *Nemsa*, but Kurds from Iran, following Persian, called the same county *Utrîsh*. Whereas the former called a car *seyare*, the latter called it *mashên,* and those from Turkey called it *Araba*. In addition to vocabulary, the grammar and even writing style of Kurdish started to be influenced by the dominant official state languages in the region. Because the Kurds, especially Kurds who were being ruled by different states, could not communicate with one another easily for almost a century, they had no effective means of articulating and sharing discursive identity constructs.

Although the press served as a catalyst in engendering the first modern nation-states in Europe and America (Anderson 1991; McLuhan 1962), the many obstacles facing the Kurdish press have prevented it from being the mass medium capable of fostering a Kurdish imagined community.[3] Thus, printing in Kurdish has historically

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[3] Hassanpour (1992) contends that, from the beginning, the Kurdish press was "the organ of Kurdish nationalism" (p. 221). However, at least until the end of the 1980s, the Kurdish press was facing major challenges—it has been characterized as "the absence of enduring dailies, low circulation, poor distribution facilities… poor printing facilities, shortage of newsprint" (Hassanpour 1992, p. 276; see also

been performed by and for small groups of the intelligentsia rather than for the Kurdish public at large. Radio and cable television broadcasting, too, have been influential in shaping and promoting national identities in places like Europe and North America (Morley 1992; Price 1995). In Kurdistan, however, with the exception of Kurdistan-Iraq since 1991, the states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria have nearly always held a monopoly on broadcasting to serve and promote their own dominant and official culture, language and political agenda, and to work towards assimilating the Kurds and other minorities.

The hegemonic state-controlled broadcasting throughout Kurdistan and among Kurdish diasporic communities, however, was not seriously challenged until the launch of the first Kurdish satellite television channel, MED-TV, in Western Europe in 1995. MED-TV reached Kurds living all around the world and was designed to develop Kurdish culture and language, sustain Kurdish identity, and resist suppression (Karim 1998; Hassanpour 1998). According to several studies, the state of Turkey exhausted every possible avenue in an attempt to silence the station (Hassanpour 2003a; Wahlbeck 2002; White 2000). MED-TV's license, initially issued in Britain, was revoked in April 1999. However, on July 31 1999, Medya TV began broadcasting, and around the same time, two additional 24-h Kurdish satellite television channels, Kurdistan TV and Kurd Sat started airing their programs. Currently, there are about a dozen Kurdish satellite television stations.

Another major challenge to the state-controlled broadcasting in Kurdish has been the proliferation of the Internet among the Kurds.[4] Romano (2002) focuses on the ways in which the Internet enabled Kurds living in diaspora to organize demonstrations, to discuss "forbidden" topics related to Kurdistan and its politics, and to distribute banned publications within Turkey. Mills (2002) observes that similar to Tibetans and the Zapatistas the Kurds use the Internet to maintain their "'logical state' or 'cyber-nation' known as Kurdistan … providing common points of contact and sources of instantaneous cultural and political information to its members around the world" (p. 82). Van den Bos and Nell (2006) observe that "Turkish-Kurdish" websites link these Kurds to other Kurds living in diasporic communities or in Turkey. They conclude that "transnational networks and new media need not broaden or dissolve territoriality, but may reinforce it" (p. 202). Similarly Candan and Hunger (2008) suggest that Kurdish immigrants from Germany use the Internet to create a "cyber-nation." These studies are important in that they reinforce previous research on the crucial role of communication technologies in creating "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991). However, one

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Footnote 3 continued

Ahmadzadeh 2003). The status of the press has remained largely unchanged for most parts of Kurdistan (Kutschera 2005; Malmisanij 2006a, b; Murad 2005), and the problem is aggravated by the fact that the majority of Kurds are illiterate, especially in their mother tongue, with the exception of small groups of the intelligentsia (Koohi-Kamali 2004; UNESCO 2010).

[4] Two major changes in the early 2000s contributed to an exponential growth in Kurdish Internet. First, Kurdistan started to be served by relatively sufficient ISP services. Second, Kurd IT Group (www.kurditgroup.org), a technical group of Kurdish volunteers, developed the first Unicode-based Kurdish fonts and the Windows Kurdish Support program which made Kurdish writing with computers and publishing on the Internet (in both Arabic and Latin-based alphabets) a great deal easier.

should take most of their findings cautiously since none of these studies conducted textual analyses of the actual content of the communication that is claimed to have taken place, nor has there been paid close attention to the different languages or Kurdish language varieties used in the online activities of the Kurds. Erikson (2007) seems to be the only study that underlines the heterogeneity of the discourse practices on the Internet and concludes that the "diaspora or virtual nationalism" is unlike the nation-state model of nationalism. He suggests that in order to understand a nation without a state, such as that of the Kurds, we need to abandon the classic notion of the nation as a homogenous entity and instead consider pluralism as a part of the equation. However, Erikson's observations, similar to others discussed here, are based on Kurdish Internet sources presented in English and other languages than Kurdish. It is doubtful that the prime objective of non-Kurdish language web sites is to invoke Kurdishness in audiences that may not be Kurdish in the first place.[5] In the project of identity formation among a people which considers its language as one of the most important indicators of group identity, media content presented in the native language matters a great deal. Thus, this very study focuses on media sources presented in the Kurdish language varieties.

Methodology

Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has proven to be an effective approach for studying media discourse (Fairclough 1995).[6] It is an interdisciplinary approach in the sense that it blends social theories, such as theories of national identity, with theories of language and discourse such as Systemic Functional Linguistics or text linguistics. CDA facilitates a dialogue between various social and linguistic theories (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999) in order to enable us to gain a better understanding of the ways in which language use not only reflects socio-cultural practices but also contributes to their production and reconstruction. Discourse is a social practice; it is simultaneously constitutive of and constituted by social structures, relations and identities. For example, national identities are reflected and articulated in the use of language and discourse and at the same time, they are constructed, reproduced and sustained through discursive practices carried out by people with certain ideologies and worldviews (Weiss and Wodak 2003). It is important to note that social realities such as national identities do exist outside discourse. However, to paraphrase Hall (1980), identities are constantly mediated by and through discourse.

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[5] As hoped by the owner of www.kurdmedia.com, websites about minorities presented in languages other than their own draw the attention of other communities and individuals to the plight and concerns of a particular minority (R. F., personal communication, February 5, 2010; see also UNESCO 2005).

[6] Media discourse "is a recontextualizing principle for appropriating other discourses and bringing them into a special relation with each other for the purposes of their dissemination and mass consumption" (Chouliaraki 1999, p. 39).

The CDA framework that was used here for studying media discourse is multivariate since it consists of three interrelated dimensions: discourse practices, text, and socio-cultural practices (Fairclough 1995). At the discourse practice level, issues of text production and consumption are addressed. For example, one should ask questions about the mode of communication used (e.g. print vs. audiovisual), the speed of the medium in disseminating content, and the accessibility of the medium. Questions about the producers and presenters of media products and texts are also important. Finally, there is a need to ask questions about the size of the audience that the medium can capture. Arriving at some answers to these questions should enable us to answer the question of—how are national identities constructed? At the text level, CDA involves a detailed analysis of text properties such as linguistic elements and audiovisual signs. The aim of analysis at this level is to describe the text, seeking answers to the question: out of what symbols, images and discursive means are national identities constructed? Given the scope of this paper, I have limited my analysis of the text to an examination of naming, pronouns, and tense. Analysis at the sociocultural level attempts to explain how social, cultural and political contexts influence the ways texts are produced, distributed and consumed. At this level, questions should be asked about the ownership of the media, their economic base, and political affiliations and motives, to search for answers to the following question: who constructs national identities and why? According to Fairclough (1995), an analyst may not focus equally on all levels of analysis. Despite granting this flexibility with the framework, Fairclough asserts: "it is, I believe, important to maintain the comprehensive orientation to communicative events which is built into the framework, even if one is concentrating upon only certain aspects of them in analysis" (p. 62).

Data: television

Television data analysed in this paper is from one of the most important Kurdish satellite television stations, Kurdistan TV (KTV). KTV started broadcasting in 1999 from Iraqi Kurdistan, with broadcasting bureaus in diasporic Kurdish communities. KTV is received worldwide via satellite dish and Internet live streaming, 24-h a day, 7 days a week. The station is important at a socio-political level because it belongs to arguably the most powerful Kurdish political organization, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), whose leader Masoud Barzani is the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (in Iraq). KDP enjoys considerable influence over the Kurds not only in Iraq, but also in Turkey, Iran, and Syria. Thus, KTV plays a significant role in producing and disseminating discursive constructs of Kurdish ethnic and/or national identities.

The data obtained from KTV consisted of 1 week of videotaped broadcasting. It was important to choose an ordinary week for data collection so that data represented KTV's regular programming as opposed to programming during national holidays or special occasions, where symbols and rhetoric of nationalism are overtly and abundantly on display. This decision for selecting the data was made after close observations of the station for about two years, during which notes were taken and random programs were videotaped to gain some preliminary knowledge

about the station's programming, language use, and discursive constructs. Random recordings were also important for comparison of certain programs with actual data. With the same objective in mind, observations of KTV broadcasting, note-taking, and random videotaping were continued for another two years after the data was collected. Of the 168 h of broadcasting videotaped, about 56 h was comprised of repeat programs. The rest of the programs (approximately 112 h) were analysed with two objectives in mind. First, programs were categorised based on their genres and themes (see below), and their languages or language varieties were identified along with their producers, directors, hosts and guests. Second, for the purposes of closer textual analysis, selected texts were marked and classified.

Data: Internet

Internet data collection was informed by online ethnography (Androutsopoulos 2006). I carried out a systematic selection of online sources, made systematic observations of online activities and discourse practices, and communicated with group members, online or offline, to elicit further information. I also employed "guerrilla ethnography" (Yang 2003)[7] which is less systematic but more flexible and thus more appropriate and productive for collecting online data. In this study, as a "guerrilla ethnographer," I entered selected sites with an open mind, browsed pages, explored links and other components of sites, took notes, downloaded files, and became involved whenever possible (e.g. left comments on blogs, posted messages on discussion boards, participated in chat rooms, and asked questions). Selected sites were revisited for deeper exploration and more substantial information gathering and exchange.

In order to map Kurdish online environments and activities, I applied several criteria to selected sites. First, following Erikson (2007) I ensured that the data is representative of various constituents of the Internet including web directories, websites, chat rooms, weblogs, and social networking interfaces such as YouTube and Facebook. Second, I selected online sources that reflected Kurdistan's regional and linguistic diversities. For example, Kurds from Syria speak the same Kurdish variety (i.e. Kurmanji) as the vast majority of Kurds from Turkey. However, websites representing both regions were selected. The data also included online sources with content in the main Kurdish language varieties (i.e. Kurmanji, Sorani, Hawrami, and Zazaki). In addition to these criteria, I selected sites that maintained an ongoing online presence and were regularly updated. For example, I chose two weblogs that have been active since 2002.

In order to find sites that met the above criteria I used several strategies. First, I consulted two of the top Kurdish web directories according to Google (www. koord.com, and www.kurdland.com). Next, I made use of Alexa Internet, Inc. (www.alexa.com), a resource which provides information about Internet site starting dates, traffic, and audience distribution. Finally, I conducted telephone or email

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[7] The term "guerrilla ethnography" is borrowed from guerrilla warfare in which armed individuals or small groups take the enemy lines by surprise, penetrate their defence lines, hit them and withdraw as quickly as possible. The method has been used effectively in literary studies, business and computer mediated communications.

interviews with the webmaster of two Kurdish web directories, moderators of the two most popular chat rooms on Paltalk.com, two bloggers, and the webmasters or owners of ten websites.

Findings and analysis

Discourse practices of KTV

KTV programs can be classified into the following content categories: arts and entertainment, news, children's programming, current affairs, socio-cultural programs, history and demography, shows in non-Kurdish languages, and other programs. Table 1 shows the distribution of KTV programs over these categories during the week of analysis.

KTV offers programs with themes and content concerning the history, culture, literature, demography, geography and current affairs of both south Kurdistan and other parts of Kurdistan (in Turkey, Iran, and Syria). For example, close to 50% of the shows that are devoted to the history and demography of Kurdistan are about either all of Kurdistan or parts other than Kurdistan-Iraq. Also, people from all parts of Kurdistan and diasporic communities participate in programs as hosts, guests, interviewees and call-ins. One could suggest that the content of the programs and the manner in which they are presented have the potential to contribute to the construction of both a regional (southern Kurdistani) and cross-border Kurdish identity. To illustrate this I will focus now on which language varieties of Kurdistan are used and how their usages facilitate the construction and reproduction of other components of national identity such as territory.

Table 1 Distribution of KTV programs during the week of August 06–12, 2005

Categories	Description of categories	Percentage
Arts and entertainment	Video clips, concerts, and entertaining shows	36
News	Including weather, sports, and business news	15.2
Children's	Dubbed cartoons, local production, Kurdish lessons	9.4
Current affairs	Current political issues	9.2
Socio-cultural	Cultural activities, youth and women issues, education	4.5
History and demography	Documentaries on past history of Kurdistan or current demographic descriptions of Kurdistan	2.7
Languages other than Kurdish	Arabic, Turcoman, Assyrian, Hawrami (a distinct variety of Kurdish)	8.5
Other	Commercials and announcements, promotion of KTV programs, news in picture, special reports, occasional airing of drama, films and plays	14.5
Total		100

Language use on KTV as identity manifestation

KTV legitimates the Kurdish language by using it as its main language of broadcasting. Guyot (2007) observes that "television tends to confer legitimacy on any linguistic cause" (p. 39), and "television can revitalize the cultures and languages of minorities" (ibid.). Television may not be capable of revitalising cultures or languages on its own, but it does "confer credibility and legitimacy on language" (Hassanpour 1997, p. 924), especially if the language is threatened. The fact that Kurdish is the prime language of a television station broadcasting 24-h a day, 7 days a week, legitimizes the status of Kurdish and perhaps assists the language in sustaining its vitality.

Hassanpour (1998) has referred to MED-TV as a language academy. The same might be said about KTV, which provides Kurdish language-learning programming. Given that these lessons are in the Kurmanji dialect and also in the Latin-based alphabet, it is safe to suggest that these lessons are directed at Kurdish audiences in Turkey who mostly speak the Kurmanji variety written in Latin-based alphabet and who do not have access to mother-tongue education. KTV seems to aim for the construction of a cross-border Kurdish identity. Furthermore, KTV airs Japanese, Russian, and Disney cartoons dubbed into Kurdish. It is important to note that the station occasionally airs non-dubbed English cartoons, but never cartoons in the dominant languages of the states where Kurds live, such as Persian, Turkish and Arabic. This can be seen as a strategy of constructing out-groups.

KTV employs unique programming techniques that expose audiences to more than one Kurdish variety in the same show or program. These techniques may foster mutual intelligibility among Kurdish speech varieties. For example, the main newscast is presented by two people, each speaking one of the two major varieties of Kurdish, Kurmanji and Sorani. As a common practice, when the news item is presented by the Sorani speaker, the accompanying report is usually given by a Kurmanji speaker. In addition, there are numerous talk shows with guests who speak a Kurdish variety different from that of the host.[8] Kurds from various speech communities participate in KTV shows, either by calling in or by being a part of the production or presentation teams. Finally, music clips by artists from all regions of Kurdistan and diasporas are aired on KTV daily. One could suggest that continuous exposure to different Kurdish varieties on KTV and other satellite television stations might make Kurdish varieties increasingly mutually intelligible.[9]

Although the vast majority of modern nation-building projects have been marked by the nation-state ideology, or "nationalist ideology" (Shohamy 2006, p. 23), wherein ideal nations have only one official and promoted language (e.g. eighteenth century France, twentieth century Turkish republic), KTV as an agent of Kurdish nation-building, promotes language diversity in Kurdistan. This is in line with the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG's) public education system which

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[8] My own observation of these Kurdish TV programs indicate that when communicating in different varieties, speakers occasionally run into difficulty understanding each other.

[9] Some members of Kurdish communities from Kurdistan and diasporas have reported that after several months of viewing KTV and other television stations with similar programming techniques they have started to understand speech varieties other than their own better.

promotes schooling in the mother tongue for at least two Kurdish varieties (i.e. Sorani and Kurmanji) and non-Kurdish and minority languages in the region (Skutnabb-Kangas and Fernandes 2008). KTV produces and airs a 1-h weekly show in the Kurdish variety of Hawrami and, in addition to daily Arabic shows and news KTV also airs weekly programs in Turkomani and Assyrian Neo-Aramaic—the languages of non-Kurdish minorities living in Kurdistan. Interestingly enough, while KTV fosters language diversity, it also cultivates discursive constructions of a Greater Kurdistan that seem to assist Kurdish audiences across the borders of several nation-states to imagine a common territory, a common homeland. A brief textual analysis of such discursive constructs follows.

Textual analysis of KTV discourse

Billig (1995) has demonstrated that in studying discourses of national identity in the media attention should be paid to the weather forecast because it has become one of the indispensable parts of the news on which people often rely in their daily lives. In small but significant ways the weather forecast constantly reconstructs the nation. Discussing the significant place of the news weather in the British nationalist discourse, Billig states,

> 'The weather' appears as an objective, physical category, yet it is contained within national boundaries. At the same time, it is known that the universe of weather is larger than the nation. There is 'abroad'; there is 'around the world'. These are elsewheres beyond 'our' elsewheres… all this, in its small way, helps to reproduce the homeland as the place in which 'we' are at home, 'here' at the habitual centre of 'our' daily universe. (p. 117)

KTV, twice every day, reconstructs the homeland, Kurdistan, by reminding its viewers what places belong and what places do not. Naming places and the listing and presenting the names of places serve both in-group and out-group representations (van Dijk 1993).

Naming practices are seldom arbitrary. Different names given to people or places indicate the attitudes and beliefs of the speakers and writers towards them (Fowler and Kress 1979; Bourdieu 1991). Names not only identify but they could also define; they not only indicate the degree of intimacy with but also distance from people, places and things. They help speakers and writers to change and create realities that fit their ideologies (Galasiński and Skowronek 2001). In the discourse of national identity, naming the nation and what is believed to be national ingredients such as geographical places are among the prime naming practices (Billig 1995; Jenson 1993).

KTV reports the weather of Kurdistan and the rest of the world by presenting alphabetical lists of cities in two sets (see Table 2). The first set encompasses major Kurdish-populated cities, regardless of their actual nation-state location. The second set includes the non-Kurdish world's capital cities including Ankara, Baghdad, Damascus and Tehran. As is evident in the following table, the cities that KTV believes to be Kurdish are presented as belonging to the same category or set: home. In contrast, the capital cities of the host states (Baghdad, Ankara, Tehran and

Table 2 Summary of the list of the cities as presented in KTV's weather forecast

City names as presented on KTV	Country location	Official names of the cities	Indigenous (Kurdish) names of the cities
Considered Kurdistani (in-group)			
Amêd	Turkey	Diyarbakir	*Amêd*
Çemçemal	Iraq	The same	The same
Duhok	Iraq	The same	The same
Hewlêr	Iraq	Erbil/Arbil	*Hewlêr*
Kerkûk	Iraq	The same	The same
Kirmaşan	Iran	Kermanshah	*Kirmaşan*
Mehabad	Iran	The same	The same
More Kurdish cities in alphabetical order			
Qamişlo	Syria	Al Qamishli	*Qamişlo*
More Kurdish cities in alphabetical order			
Considered non-Kurdistani (out-group)			
Amsterdam (Other capitals)	Netherlands		
Bexda (Baghdad)	Iraq		
Enqere (Ankara) (Other capitals)	Turkey		
Taran (Tehran)	Iran		
Şam (Damascus)	Syria		

Damascus) are constructed, in Billig's (1995) terms, as "abroad" and "elsewhere" (p. 117), just like the rest of the world: different from home.

A Greater Kurdistan is also mentally constructed through the renaming of Kurdish cities. States have employed both physical and symbolic violence to assimilate the Kurds as part of their modern nation-building projects (Hassanpour 2003b). One of the symbolic violent actions has involved changing, banning and regulating names of people, places, towns, villages, roads and even plants and animals that have borne signs of Kurdishness.[10] Motivated often by the same nationalist ideology, one occasionally comes across two names for some villages and towns throughout Kurdistan: the name known to the locals and the name given by the officials of the ruling states. For example, the state-designated city of Diyarbakir is Amêd (in Northern Kurdistan), Erbil is Hewlêr (in Southern Kurdistan), and Kirmanshah is Kirmaşan (in Eastern Kurdistan). By choosing the local names of the towns that have two names, KTV reclaims their Kurdishness or Kurdistaniness.

This discursive construction in the context of KTV is significant because whereas many Kurdish symbols such as the flag, mountains, dance, costume and various customs are explicitly displayed and glorified on KTV, the map of Greater Kurdistan is rarely shown because to Iraqi authorities in Baghdad the map of a greater Kurdistan could signify separatist and secessionist ambitions of Iraqi Kurds,

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[10] For example, according to a BBC report (Turkey renames 'divisive' animals 2005), Turkey changed the name of three animals in its 'southeast' (Kurdistan), because the authorities believed that names which made references to Kurdistan and Armenia were 'divisive' and against Turkey's 'unity'. For example the red fox that was known as *Vulpes Vulpes Kurdistanica* was renamed as *Vulpes Vulpes*.

something that Kurdish leaders of Kurdistan south have continuously denied (O'Shea 2004). KTV helps its audiences to imagine the homeland in language and specifically in renaming places and how places are arranged on TV screen. Further micro analysis of this kind is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to note that these discursive constructs are created by employing many more linguistic devices such as metaphors, deixis, active versus passive grammatical structures, and pronouns that are common in discourses of national identity (see Wodak et al. 2009, pp. 36–42). These are used, particularly on television, often in conjunction with visual and aural meaning-making devices such as images (e.g. the flag, landscapes, national heroes, and so forth), colours, and sounds.

Discourse practices on the Internet

Features of the Kurdish Internet

Although the major Kurdish political organizations have a strong presence on the Internet, the vast majority of websites belong to smaller Kurdish organizations (i.e. those that do not own satellite television channels or other major media outlets), different groups of individuals and Kurdish intelligentsia (e.g. women activists, human rights groups) and ordinary individuals.[11]

Websites serve various purposes. For example, they function as online libraries and distribution systems for print materials. Some of the notable websites that provide free access to Kurdish books are www.nefel.com, www.amude.net, and *Kitêbxaney Kurdî* (The Kurdish Library) at www.pertwk.com. According to its owner, the latter has over 1,000 books available for download free of charge, mostly in PDF format (B. H. personal communication, April 18, 2007). This is very significant when one realises that in 2006, none of the 209 public libraries in Kurdistan-Turkey held a single Kurdish book (Malmisanij 2006b). Libraries in Iranian Kurdistan have been in similar circumstances. It should be noted that most of the books that are available for downloading on *Kitêbxaney Kurdî* are in Kurdish Sorani, the medium of the website. Other websites such as Nefel and Amude that use Kurdish Kurmanji mostly carry books in that Kurdish variety. This is an example of the diversity of Kurdish online activities across linguistic lines, a theme that I have encountered throughout my analysis.

The Internet has also given rise to online news websites that have no print version (e.g. Avesta Kurd, Rizgari Online, Peyamner). Internet technology has enabled highly political news websites such as www.renesans.nu to engage audiences in discussions regarding Kurdish issues. Readers can react to news items and featured articles by leaving comments on the website. In this way, audiences can experience a sense of shared belonging, not only by being involved in the ritual of reading the same thing simultaneously (Anderson 1991), but also by discussing and debating the same issues in their own language. This capacity of the Internet as a platform for the dissemination of and debating news and current affairs has been strengthened by

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[11] In January 2004, the website www.koord.com claimed that it had indexed 2000 Kurdish websites. However, in recent years there has been an exponential growth in online Kurdish activities.

the fact that websites can also function as broadcasting facilities. Since the mid 1990s, over a dozen radio stations belonging to Kurdish political organizations (e.g. Dengê Mezopotamya), private entities (e.g. Radio Newa) and western states (e.g. Voice of America, Kurdish Service) can be heard by Kurdish audiences worldwide. Most of the major Kurdish television stations can be viewed on the Internet as well.

The chat room is another significant feature of Kurdish Internet. Most chat rooms are very restrictive on what language can be used for chatting: Kurdish only. This is very interesting because it is different from observations made in other contexts. For example, Luis Fernandez (2001) reports how the moderator of a discussion list devoted to the future of Ireland discourages participants from posting in Gaelic. In his research, he observes that there is a complete absence of Basque in Basque forums. In both cases, the use of minority languages has been abandoned to accommodate those individuals who do not speak Gaelic or Basque and prefer the language of the majority, English and Spanish respectively. Despite being so persistent about the use of Kurdish in some chat rooms, visitors cannot easily write in Kurdish because most of the popular chat rooms do not support the Kurdish Arabic-based alphabet. The writing script which is nonstandard, idiosyncratic, and a mixture of the characters from the Kurdish Latin-based writing system and English sometimes makes communication in chat rooms challenging. This shortcoming is not unique to Kurdish Sorani speakers. Danet and Herring (2007) report that "speakers of languages with non-Latin writing systems, such as Greek, Russian, Arabic and Hebrew, and the East Asian languages" (p. 557) were all disadvantaged for a long time. In contrast to the text-only chat rooms, real-time online voice and video (e.g. Paltalk.com) chat rooms are popular among the Kurdish Internet users mainly because communicating in these chat rooms does not completely depend on writing. Yet, this internet feature too seems to foster language diversification; a Kurmanji speaker rarely can be heard in rooms where Sorani is the predominant variety spoken, and vice versa.

The blogosphere seems to be another environment where language diversification is cultivated. Although Kurdish blogging experienced a very slow start the number of Kurdish blogs increased sharply at the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007 when the Kurdish blogging platform Kurdblogger (www.kurdblogger.com) was launched. For the first time, this new platform made it very easy to blog and write in Kurdish Sorani. By the end of 2008, there were about 6,000 blogs registered on Kurdblogger.[12] Although some bloggers write in languages other than Kurdish, it still seems that blogging, like other features of the Internet, has provided Kurds with a means of articulating their identity by writing in their language. At the same time, the writing system differences of the two major Kurdish language varieties are reinforced in blogging. There are very few Kurmanji blogs on Kurdblogger.com.

In addition to websites, chat rooms, and weblogs, Kurds also utilise Internet tools including email, forums, electronic mailing lists, instant messaging services, and social networking tools such as MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube. Social networking tools in particular foster the construction and dissemination of a

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[12] There are also Kurdish blogs on other blogging platforms such as www.blogger.com. Also, not all Kurdish blogs continue to be active or updated regularly.

Kurdish cross-border identity. The language varieties used in these tools is largely suggestive of the geographical location and population size of the users. For example, Kurds from the west, especially the UK and Scandinavian countries, make up the majority of the Roj Bash Kurdistan (Good Day Kurdistan) forum's visitors. In contrast, the forum Kurdish Love, which uses Kurdish Sorani as its main medium, attracts well over 50% of its users and visitors from Iran and Iraq. Another forum, Baydigi, which uses Turkish and Kurmanji Kurdish as its main languages, has over 80% of its visitors and users from Turkey. Language is one of the main factors that determines the type and size of audience that Internet sources attract.

Language use on the Internet as identity manifestation

The Internet has been used with the intention to maintain, promote and teach Kurdish. Although Kurdish Internet features utilise various non-Kurdish languages such as English, Turkish, Arabic and Persian, Kurdish Kurmanji and Sorani are the primary languages of the Kurdish Internet. About a dozen websites use the multimodal features of the Internet (i.e. text, animation and sound) effectively to teach Kurdish to both children and adults.[13] All these websites offer open access to their materials. There seems to be a genuine commitment to the maintenance and promotion of the Kurdish language as a vital feature of Kurdish identity. For example, the website *Fêrbûnî Zimanî Kurdî* (Kurdish Language Learning) displays the following slogan: "Language is identity … Kurdish lessons are steps towards the fortification of Kurdish language." The website Nefel displays another message on its banner in Kurmanji, which is indicative of the emotional feelings that many Kurds attach to their mother tongue: "Kurdish is lightness for our eyes. Kurds! Preserve your language."[14] This, however, seems to go against Anderson's (1991) view suggesting that although the nation is imagined in language, it matters very little what language is used to serve this function (p. 133). For Anderson (1991), the nation was not imagined in any language per se but in print language, and that print language could even be the language of the colonizer and the "other." For many Kurds, however, Kurdishness is imagined in the Kurdish language.

The idea that the Internet has facilitated writing in Kurdish as an indispensable component of Kurdishness comes through vividly in weblogs. Gulagenim, the first Kurdish blogger, writes passionately about her experience of writing in Kurdish:

> They never taught me [how to write in Kurdish] … For me, writing in Kurdish is still like a childhood dream that has not come true, and now as an adult I am approaching it with hesitation and trepidation; I am afraid that I might make too many mistakes, become a stranger with myself … with my language (Gulagenim 2002, my translation).

Gulagenim uses her blog as a space for practicing writing in Kurdish and overcoming the fear of writing in her mother tongue. In a 2004 chat room session devoted to Kurdish blogging, Gulagenim admits that, prior to blogging, she did not

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[13] The directory *Koord* provides a list of these websites (koord.com/weblanguage/fer_buni_kurdi.htm).

[14] The Kurdish Kurmanji text says, *Kurdî bînahiya chavên me ye. Kurdino zimanê xwe biparêzn!*

know how to write in Kurdish. She acknowledges that the medium has encouraged her and enabled her to write and learn her first language. Tewar, another female Kurdish blogger, echoes Gulagenim's thoughts:

> I have been thinking about what Gulagenim has said that writing in the mother tongue comes with a unique sensation. I have been thinking about the uncertainty and nervousness that I experience every time I want to write in Kurdish … (Tewar 2002, my translation).

Despite difficulties, the two bloggers have continued writing in Kurdish. In fact, they have become the veterans of Kurdish blogging and one wonders what keeps motivating them to write. When admitting that writing in Kurdish is so difficult that it pushes her to quit, Tewar writes:

> But, I cannot quit … Language is a part of me. Words are mirrors that reflect my ideas and feelings … Without [our] language we are nothing … A language is as important as a country, history and flag … Language is a part of our personality … Language is identity … To express your inner thoughts and feelings … you need the language of feelings and the soul; no language is closer to one's feelings and soul than the mother tongue… When writing we might make mistakes … We may not have a rich vocabulary… but, let's not quit; let's continue [writing] … (ibid., my translation).

For Tewar and many bloggers, language is important as a symbol of national identity; it is also a decisive factor in defining a person (Edwards 2009). Fishman (1989) states "[t]he essence of a nationality is its spirit, its individuality, its soul. This soul is not only reflected and protected by the mother tongue but, in a sense, *the mother tongue is itself an aspect of the soul*, a part of the soul, if not the soul made manifest" (p. 276, emphasis in original). Fishman (1989) has referred to the rediscovering of the mother tongue as an "intellectual rebirth" (p. 283). It seems that Tewar and Gulagenim have experienced just this form of rebirth by blogging in Kurdish.

Along with writing, speaking Kurdish has also been enhanced by the Internet. A. Ahmad, one of the moderators of the most popular Kurdish chat room, Kurdistan United, suggests that many of the people who are now regular speakers in the chat room had difficulty discussing political and social issues in Kurdish at the beginning (A. Ahmed, personal communication, July 6, 2007). This is especially true of the Kurds from Iran, Turkey and Syria who have been educated in languages other than their mother tongue. Nevertheless, in most of the Kurdish chat rooms including Kurdistan United, speaking in Kurdish is a must. In these chat rooms, usually speaking in any language other than Kurdish is considered non-Kurdish behaviour and is not tolerated.

Finally, the Internet has provided communicative spaces for lesser used and smaller Kurdish varieties. Varieties such as Hawrami and Zazaki have comparatively fewer speakers than Kurmanji and Sorani and generally are given very limited air time on Kurdish radio and television and minimal space in Kurdish periodicals. However, there are several websites that use Zazaki and Hawrami as their main language of communication (e.g. www.zazaki.net or www.zazaki.org and www.hawraman.com).

Textual analysis of Internet discourse

Textual analysis of Internet texts can reveal a great deal about how identities are constructed in language on the Internet. Because of its fluidity, flexibility, and accessibility (Yang 2003) the Internet is a suitable environment for the coexistence of a multiplicity of identities that might be articulated in the same discursive event or text. Kurdish Internet users are able to construct their individual, social group, and national identities simultaneously in their own language. To illustrate this, I will provide a brief micro analysis of a blog post by Tewar.

In one of her earliest posts, she writes:

> *I* remember *once upon a time I* had a notebook with a childish handwriting of *mine* that said: '*my* memories.' That notebook held of all *my* secrets … It did not take *me* long to realize that *I* had to hide the notebook from everyone …
> [I thought] *I* must do my best to prevent my thoughts, feelings and dreams from being disclosed … *I* must behead *my* dreams and hang *my* desires … [Doing all this] wouldn't have been surprising because *I* was a *girl*, and *girls* are not supposed to immerse themselves in imaginations, to dream, to love or to have feelings.
> *We* have always *been scared* … *We* have always *been petrified*. *We* have got used to this fear … *We are* ashamed of our own feelings and dreams.
> And now, I am sitting here and talking to you about my feelings … I am neither ashamed nor afraid … and *I don't* know if it is because *I am* courageous or because no one else *knows* that it *is me* who writes these things … (July 1, 2002, my translation, my emphasis).

Several textual features in this post by Tewar deserve a closer examination: pronouns, tense, and passive voice. Pronouns deserve particular attention, especially when analysing discourses of identity (Billig 1995). In this text, the pronoun "I" contributes to the construction of the self and the individual identity. At the same time, the pronoun "we" frames the self within a group of Kurdish "girls" and also the larger collective identity of Kurds. The pronoun "you" indicates a clear awareness of an addressee, her readers. The identities of both the blogger and the group she identifies with, that is, all Kurdish girls, are defined in relation to the "others," those that "scared" and "petrified" them (i.e. Kurdish patriarchy and non-Kurdish state authorities who have not been in favour of promoting these women's mother tongue). The "others" are referenced through passive voice constructions such as "been scared" and "been petrified." One of the implications of this passive construction is that the author manages to hide the agent of "petrifying." She says that she might be "courageous" to write this text but the use of the passive voice seems to indicate that she still does not feel free and protected even in Stockholm.[15] She reaches out for "you," an addressee in Bakhtin's (1986) terms, to establish a dialogue that might produce a sense of understanding of the self and a feeling of belonging to her group. The use of the past and present tenses also indicates the

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[15] There have been instances of violence against Kurdish women perpetuated by Kurdish men in the name of "honour killing" in Sweden and other Western countries such as the UK.

blogger's attachment to her past. Miller and Shepherd (2009) note that the use of the present tense is predominant in English diary journals indicating that the content of the journal is about the here and now, the blogger's current daily life. Present tense denotes immediacy and currency (Dunmire 1997). In the case of posts by the two Kurdish bloggers, however, the present is often accompanied by traces of the past, the bloggers' life experiences in their homeland, Kurdistan.

Discussion and conclusion

Both KTV and the Internet have been used by the Kurds in their struggle to reconstruct their identities and to represent themselves, not only in Kurdish language varieties, but also in non-Kurdish languages. The two media sources have magnified the role of language in the practices of identity construction. Discursive practices in these media indicate that Kurdish is held as one of the most important and salient indexes of Kurdish identity. Furthermore, these new media seem to have enabled Kurds from different regions and all walks of life to share and discuss cultural, social and political ideas and issues publicly and dialogically, and to construct and redefine their identities discursively with relative freedom and ease.

The main focus of this study has been the construction of collective identity as mediated by new media. However, because it is posited that language is an indispensable part of identity construction, it is important to discuss the significance of Kurdish language use within these media, particularly for those who have been denied both negative and positive linguistic rights.[16] The media have proven to be an important part of ensuring that speakers of lesser-used languages are able to maintain their linguistic rights (Hult 2010). In the case of the Kurds, the new media have allowed millions of Kurdish speakers to gain negative rights, and to some extent positive rights on their own, regardless of whether or not those rights are recognized by the states where they live. This is not to suggest that the new media alone can guarantee the maintenance of the Kurdish identity and language, particularly in places such as Turkey where Kurdish is threatened (Skutnabb-Kangas and Fernandes 2008). There are clearly limits to what media can do for a lesser-used language (Browne 1996, pp. 7–11; Cunliffe 2007; Riggins 1992, pp. 276–277). As Fishman (2001) has suggested the use of a minority language in the media may not be as significant as using the language at home or in the community as far as language maintenance is concerned. However, one could suggest that the use of Kurdish on television and on the Internet could enhance its use in families and the community because the media are used to teach Kurdish to those whose language has started to fragment in a linguicidal situation (Hassanpour et al. 1996). Furthermore, one should not undermine the efforts of media like KTV and the Kurdish Internet in legitimating minority language by using the language extensively, strengthening and expanding its use, enhancing ethnic and national pride among Kurdish audiences, connecting Kurds living in different states and diasporas, and enabling Kurdish individuals and

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[16] Negative right is "the right to use one's language in the private sphere without persecution or prejudice" and positive right is "the right to use one's language in the public space, to be educated in the language, to deal with the state in the language, etc." (Wright 2007, p. 203). Only Iraqi Kurds have the latter right.

groups to engage in processes of identity construction and dissemination. Previous studies have praised minority language media for similar efforts that have resulted in comparable benefits for other disadvantaged language groups (Cormack and Hourigan 2007; Danet and Herring 2007).

All language use, discourse practices, media productions and distributions are inevitably connected to socio-cultural, political and historical contexts and power relations (Fairclough 1995). Kurdish media are no exception. Interpreting the analysis in these contexts reveals some differences between the affordances and constraints of the two media under investigation in relation to Kurdish identity constructions. The findings show that KTV's discourse practices are carried out within the ideological framework and political interests of its owner, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, an organization that aspires to regional autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan as opposed to the establishment of Greater Kurdistan. Most of KTV's discourse practices and discursive constructs represent Iraqi Kurdistan as a free and autonomous small Kurdistan. However, representations of a pan-Kurdish identity are often subtle on KTV, perhaps in order to show allegiance to Iraq so that Baghdad does not perceive the Kurds as separatists. Despite this subtlety, the trans-border Kurdish identity that KTV constructs is a cultural collective identity that appeals to both Iraqi Kurds, especially the intelligentsia who make up the working force of KTV, as well as to Kurdish masses elsewhere. From this perspective, constructing a trans-border Kurdish identity on KTV is both inevitable and beneficial to KTV. It is inevitable because a shared sense of Kurdishness, often rooted in shared experiences of suffering, has existed among the Kurdish intelligentsia for a very long time (van Bruinessen 2000). It may not be in the interests of KTV to prevent the expressions and representations of a pan-Kurdish identity, albeit within its own hegemonic discourse. Expressions and representations of a pan-Kurdish identity are beneficial because KTV captures more audiences and possibly more sympathy and support from Kurds worldwide for the south Kurdistan autonomous government at a time when it is believed to be threatened by neighbouring countries.

Whereas expressions of trans-border Kurdishness and the construction of Greater Kurdistan are mostly subtle on KTV, they are explicit and dominant on the Internet. There are powerful and emotionally charged symbols and linguistic constructions that seem to be shared by the vast majority of Kurdish Internet users. Among these discursive constructs are the Kurdish flag, the maps of Greater Kurdistan, images of a common memory that is both glorious and painful, images of common national heroes, and a great preoccupation with the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan. However, the Internet is not as accessible as satellite television for both economic and socio-political reasons.[17] The digital divide, the difference between the haves and have-nots regarding access to the Internet (Mills 2002) certainly applies to Kurdistan. In addition, those who have access to the Internet inside Kurdistan suffer from censorship imposed by states.[18] Moreover, Kurdish websites owned by Kurds

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[17] Although a much greater number of people in Kurdistan watch satellite television than use the Internet, it does not mean that satellite dish owners are free from persecution in Turkey, Syria or Iran.

[18] For example, on April 6 2004, *Index Online* reported that "Two Kurdish-language news websites based in Germany (www.amude.com and www.qamislo.com), that provide news, pictures and video clips of demonstrations by the country's Kurdish minority, were banned by the government of Syria in

or their sympathizers sometimes are threatened by hackers, who may identify themselves as belonging to the dominant ethnic groups in the region (for example, Turkish) (Menaf 2007).[19] Despite the limitations and barriers that the Kurdish Internet has been facing, there has been a considerable growth in Kurdish online activities. Satellite television might be easier to receive but its content is often beyond the control of audiences. Once there is access to the Internet, however, online users are able to produce and disseminate their own materials as has been demonstrated by Kurdish bloggers. Furthermore, as the Internet's audio-visual features improve on social networking tools such as YouTube and Facebook, it will become easier for Kurds from different speech varieties to share more of their experiences without depending entirely on the written text or even the verbal language.

In sum, although there does not appear to be one single Kurdish identity, within the last decade Kurds from diverse areas have started to learn a great deal more about themselves and their 'others.' In recent years, various socio-political developments, from the US-led war in Iraq to Turkey's bid for membership in the European Union, have transformed Kurdish communities, particularly as these communities are increasingly diasporic. In addition, new communication technologies have enabled Kurds to begin overcoming the geographical and political barriers that have kept them apart and fragmented. As a result, since the mid-1990s, alongside several regional Kurdish identities, a pan-Kurdish or cross-border Kurdish identity has been strengthened, although neither regional nor cross-border Kurdish identity is entirely homogenous.

These observations lend themselves to some significant theoretical assertions in line with other studies that have looked at the impact of the new media on the identity formation practices of non-state peoples (Mills 2002; Erikson 2007). Far from being agents of homogenization only, satellite television and the Internet have enabled non-state actors and marginalised minorities to reify both their regional and cross-border identities in language and other visual and aural symbols and signs. Furthermore, the nation-state ideology, which primarily conceives of a national identity as culturally and linguistically homogenous, may no longer be tenable especially in the context of emerging or stateless nations. At the same time, Kurdish nationalist discourses are hard at work to impose a top-down language policing similar to many other contexts around the world (see Kelly-Holmes and Moriarty 2009). Kurdish nationalists from different regions may not be able to communicate in the same chat room because their speech varieties may not be mutually intelligible, however, most of them insist on calling all their speech varieties Kurdish, one language, because they believe one language also denotes one national identity. Naming languages matters (Shohamy 2006).

Notwithstanding the complexity of the socio-political context which bears upon the formation of Kurdish identity, it is not possible to predicate for certain how far

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Footnote 18 continued

mid-March". According to the same source, at the time Syria only had two ISPs and they were both controlled by the Syrian government.

[19] In 2007, close to a dozen popular websites were hacked, including www.dengekan.info, www.kurdgoal.com, www.kurdmedia.com, and www.rizgari.org.

this new identity formation will go and what the socio-political consequences might be. One major reason for this uncertainty is that when human beings come into contact they do not just share similarities, they also notice differences. The Internet may not have increased the diversity of the Kurdish language, but it has more clearly exposed certain fragmentations. Kurds have lived under different hegemonic cultures for nearly a century. Seeing their fellow Kurds on television may make them realise how different they are from each other, and lead to the abandonment of a poorly imagined pan-Kurdish identity. On the other hand, people often politicize their identities when they are rejected, oppressed and persecuted to the extent that the emergence of minority nationalism can be seen as a reaction to majority nationalism (Heller 1999). The Kurds may choose to downplay their internal and linguistic differences so long as their host states continue to deny them rights. This shared experience of oppression will continue to provide a fertile ground for satellite television and the Internet to foster the formation of a stronger, yet pluralistic, multilingual collective identity.

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