

The Use of Scripture Media for Agile Publishing, Revisions, and Community Engagement

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Abstract:

Digital media, including audio/visual media, has been effectively used in iterative scripture publishing, and in not a few cases has aided in the clarification of key terms. It has enabled agile publishing of scripture revisions, and discourse reframing. The processes involved in providing audio/visual and digital media resources for language communities are an effective opportunity for enhancing local ownership and building relationships with the local community, the essence of embodiment. This paper explores the various applications of digital media in translation projects and the many ways media can be applied at all stages of a language program and scripture translation project to engage the local community and clarify the translation during the iterative publishing process. It uses case accounts and live interviews to cover the many aspects of the effective use of media in Bible translation and Scripture engagement.

In the year 1999, two of my colleagues from SIL's International Media Services, Jon and Larry, went to Brazil to do a dubbing of The Jesus Film for the Mamainde language community. Our standard procedures on doing a dubbing include allowing the community to choose whose voices they want in the video. The community was very curious about the video and there was no problem getting voices for the parts that first week. But by the second week many of the men needed to get back to their fields for a day or so and also do some hunting. Jon and Larry decided they could keep working on the video since all they needed were voices for the narrator and the person playing the part of Jesus. But later in the day they realized they still needed to record the scene with Zacchaeus. So the translator sent out a young boy to see if there was anyone in the village who could say the part (the temporary recording studio was just down a path, a little ways from the village). The boy came back with the only one still lingering in the area that day, the brother of the chief. Now, this man was known as a thief and a cheat. But this was the only person available and they needed to get the part recorded (in those days the recording process was not done digitally so each part was recorded in sequence). The man sat down to say the part. "I am a thief," the translator prompted him to say. The chief's brother's eyes bulged and sweat broke out on his forehead. "That man says I am a thief," he spoke into the mic. The recording team tried for an hour to get him to say the part correctly, as he sat there nervously sweating, saying, "He is a thief," or "He says I am a thief;" anything but the correct words. Finally the recording team explained that the part had to be said just as he was prompted in order for the film to be correct, and he finally and reluctantly said "I am a thief."

The prompter spoke the next part, “I will give back four times the amount I have stolen.” It took another hour for the chief’s brother to say this part correctly, all the while his eyes bulging and sweat pouring down his forehead. When it was finally done, he hightailed it back to the village. On the final night in the village the recording team played the rough edited video for the whole community. The chief’s brother sat near the back. When the film ended, the crowd sat silently for about 15 minutes, and then the translator shared for a few minutes and invited them to respond to the message. A few weeks later my colleagues heard from the translator that the chief’s brother had come forward that night. A church had begun and this man was led by the Lord to be the pastor.¹

A previous translation team had been assigned to this language community many years prior to this event, but had to leave the project before it was finished. The second translator assigned to this language group knew there was still no interest in the Scriptures when he arrived, so he used the translation that had been done of Luke to translate the script to the Jesus film in hopes that this video would create an interest in the Gospel message.

The involvement of the community in the dubbing process, with the recordist team and translator, and the audio/visual experience, had the impact that the translator hoped for (and he improved his ability to communicate in the language, an unexpected bonus!). The patience displayed by the recording team and the translator during the two hours with the chief’s brother also had an impact. Buried in the series of interactions was intentional and unintentional communication. The patience and respect given were by all accounts unintentional, yet spoke volumes.

This story is just one example of many in which the process involved in providing an audio/visual media option for a language community became the means that opened the door to further interest in the gospel message. Relationships, being a witness; this is incarnate involvement. It’s an example of the reality that *the journey is the destination*. It’s also an example of what Eric Graham calls a small unit of published Scripture content that led to a spiritual awakening and an appetite for more.² I highly encourage you to read Eric Graham’s updated 2019 paper, Digital Publishing - a different paradigm.

I say all this as a reminder; Bible translation takes specialists. To become a specialist in any field requires an *orderly journey* from point A to point B; a journey high on efficiency, low on uncertainty.³ But to apply that focused skill in the area of Bible translation requires an openness to ambiguity and uncertainty, often a journey that looks more like a zigzag than a straight line; and it takes the collaboration of others with a broader range of experiences.

We know there are many oral preference language communities who are not engaging with the Scriptures that are available. It is a foreign message in a foreign medium.

¹ Interview with Jon Caton, August 2019

² Digital Publishing- a different paradigm, Eric Graham, 2019

³ Range, David Epstein, 2019

(Domesticating the translation may actually lead to unintentional miscommunication. In cultures that have a closer cultural proximity to the ancient biblical culture, there is an even greater possibility of miscommunication).⁴ Bridges need to be identified that will catch the community's interest in the message. Anthropologists can shed light on a community's world view, and story crafters can introduce the Scriptures by using culturally relevant stories from the Bible. Ethno-arts specialists can identify the arts being used in the community that communicate cultural values, history, and genealogies, and then introduce the Biblical message in that same art form. In one community, they valued their cultural Psalms. So a project was started to record them, and a few of the Biblical Psalms were added to the list. The people loved these new Psalms and began to take an interest in other portions of Scripture. Another community contextualized a video that is an overview of the Old and New Testament by including their own choreographed and videoed dance to communicate parts of the story. Whether it is telling a Biblical story, chanting a portion of Scripture, creating and singing a Scripture based song, or engaging a community in the process of a video dubbing, these small units of Scripture are introducing the Word of God in culturally relevant and holistic means. And when the people are engaged and interested, the message can take root. It may not be a straight journey from point A to point B, but *the journey is the destination*.

The SIL Digital Scripture Access & Engagement Strategy Team Report highlighted the need for distribution strategies, what they see as the key to Scripture engagement. But distribution strategies are only part of the answer to Scripture engagement. Scripture based publications need to have a daily relevance to the lives of a community. If a community is multilingual, there needs to be materials available in the various languages being used, whether written, audio-visual or a combination. The community leaders need to be invested in the development of the Scripture based resources.⁵ With digital technology there should be fewer barriers to producing and distributing Scripture based resources. Digital publishing is making it possible to produce small increments of published materials in audio and text formats at the early stages of a translation project.⁶ Sometimes this smaller content can actually improve the translation process and result, and media can often be instrumental. Digital strategies should not be applied at the end of translation - they should and can be applied at all stages of a translation project.

One translation team published the Christmas story and some other books after they were consultant checked even though they knew they were not perfect yet. They did parts of the Luke video, also. Not long after they had done the video they changed the term for boat, discovering that the word they had used did not really communicate well. But that did not lessen the impact of the video. Many came to Christ from seeing the video.⁷

⁴ See Implementing Skopostheorie in Bible Translation, Nathan Esala, 2013

⁵ Gottschlich, Bettina. Transformational Scripture Engagement Among the Budu of Congo-Kinshasa, 2013.

⁶ Graham, Eric. Digital Publishing- a different paradigm, updated 2019.

⁷ From BT list email conversation

Another team working with a language group of two million spread across six West Africa countries (with immigrant populations all over the world) found that digital publication allowed the translated Scriptures to be made available in small increments after being reviewed, community tested, and consultant checked and reviewed again. Using Scripture Apps, they were able to publish early and then perfect. But the best thing was that this method allowed Scripture access for a population affected by immigration and urbanization. They have had over 10,000+ downloads from all over the world. And although the hard copy printed versions of the Scriptures were only in the hundreds, they had over 100,000 views of the Jesus Film that they produced in the language. As they get closer to completing the NT, they are doing constant revisions to improve the text. The iterative publishing and feedback has been an asset to a finished product of high quality.

What are the advantages of a Scripture video or Scripture based video like the Jesus film, especially early in a translation project?

We constantly see revisions of older translations being asked for. The reasons are varied. Even with some new translations, revisions are being requested before too many years have passed. Sometimes it is a matter of the discourse style; sometimes it is the need for a diglot with a similar style of translation. It may be the need for an audio version, in which case revision material can easily be incorporated. Of course, turning a written text into an audioized version still results in an audioization of a written text, not an oral, voiced translation of the Scriptures. If the original skopos or purpose of the translation is a written text, any oral derivatives will still have the discourse features of a written text. But a text that is written with orality in mind, with how the Scripture will sound, will have more oral qualities and be more palatable to the ears of oral preference communities. We know that the Scriptures were composed as voiced texts. So oral discourse features should be included.

Also, visual background information such as available in Scripture videos gives the hearers further clarification that the message is ancient, from another culture and time that might be completely different from theirs, or slightly similar in some ways. The visuals give some historical, cultural, and geographical information that would otherwise have to be explained in the text or in footnotes. When a Scripture film is done early in a translation project, needed changes to the translation can be identified. But that is not the only advantage.

Jim Doll, Production Director at SIL's International Media Services, shared about two Scripture Film dubbings in which he was involved.

The Chachi Jesus Film Dubbing was done in Ecuador with SIL translators Neal and Ruth Weibe. Here are three main points Jim made about that recording project:

🎬 This film dubbing project brought the various language communities living along the river together for the first time (the various speakers for the video represented all of the communities). 🎬 During the script preparation phase, while viewing the video, the people

realized some key terms that needed to be settled; so they were able to discuss and decide on these terms. 📺 Neal was able to train his translation helper to record the Scripture portions that they were working on. Because of their age and health, Neal and his wife were not able to travel the two days by river to the villages, so the translation helper took the recordings to the villages and got feedback. Neal said he would never again publish anything without the community hearing it first.

The Montagne Jesus Film dubbing was done in Canada.

This was the first project the community ever had that brought the whole village together. The dubbing project provided an opportunity for a voice coach from their own community to come in. It also opened the door for the involvement of other creative arts uniquely expressed in their culture. The people decided that their village chief should be the voice of Jesus despite his old gravelly voice, and this helped promote the video. Some local media outlets came to watch the community review and then did a write up about the project in the newspaper. This gave the community a lot of recognition, raised their status and gave them pride in their language and their community.

The IMS office also recently (August 2019) received an email letter from an Ethno 360 media/translation team in Bolivia that had been given training by IMS. They shared that, “[for the tribal groups in Bolivia] Scripture videos are non-threatening. The people let their guard down and listen. The video not only teaches, but also helps to open the door of trust for ministers.”

These kinds of involvements are part of the journey.

The journey is the destination. If we had merely taken a recording and matched it to a film (as is possible these days), where would be the relationship building? The community involvement and engagement? The local ownership? The community check that uncovered a better term?

Bible Story videos (short stories using still images and applying the Burns effect to give movement similar to a video) are also an excellent way to engage a community in producing a visual story that can be shared widely even on cell phones. These stories and their production make a great workshop activity for a church, or pastors and community leaders, even as a cluster project. If the leadership is engaged and committed, they will engage their community.

Translating the stories, learning the stories, choosing the images, engaging in the discussions for clarification and learning the context of the stories, all involve the participants holistically. This media tool is ‘participatory’ because participants analyze, decide, plan and create the stories with corresponding images of their choice. They can be used in language development work because dialogue generated during the process will help members of the language group “think and talk more deeply about different aspects of their language” (Hasselbring 2010), draw out the beliefs and knowledge of the

participants, lead to the establishment of key terms, and foster ownership by the community. The participants not only engage in creating a Bible story video, they come away having learned the stories and their contexts well enough to teach them to others. Scripture texts come alive through adding movement to carefully selected photos or images. With careful attention to biblical accuracy, key terms and a clearly understandable message, these stories can help fill the literacy gap and fuel the desire to know God and His Word. Developing the stories and images can be used as an effective, alternative place to begin Bible translation. These tools draw non-believers to seek God and motivate believers to look more deeply into the translated Scriptures. "Every culture uses stories to tell us what it means to be human, what kind of world we live in, why there is suffering and pain, and what, if anything, we can do to deal with that suffering and pain" (Willis 2004, 33).⁸

The same template style used to create Bible Story Videos is applied to another resource from SIL's International Media Services, the Bible Backgrounds Resources.

This resource includes topics on geography, climate and agriculture; Old and New Testament history and culture, including information on kings and surrounding nations, descriptions of the tabernacle and synagogues, customs such as burial, mourning, stoning, fishing; religions of the ancient tribes of the area. The text and graphics add geographical, cultural, and historical background information to the context of the stories of the Bible. Among other benefits, this can help national and indigenous pastors and lay leaders to lead Bible studies and teach the stories of the Bible with a more thorough understanding of the contexts. This resource is free from the International Media Services website and is available in major languages. Again, the purpose is to engage a community or group of community leaders in the process of translation and production of the topic.

So, have I mentioned that *the journey is the destination*? Abraham was given the promise that he would father a nation, but he only lived long enough to see that reality as far as his son Isaac. He lived for 175 years, a long journey. A journey that became the foundation for our future.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:16-17

If you want to consider the journey, digital publishing and the use of media at all stages of a language program, I would recommend that you read

- Eric Graham's excellent paper, Digital Publishing - a different paradigm (the updated version of 2019)

⁸ A Media Tool for Translation and Beyond, Doll, M. and J. Limmer, BTC paper 2011,

- And that you visit the IMS website for available resources
<https://www.internationalmediaservices.org>