

The visual storyteller: Using oral translation and digital media to engage local communities with Scripture

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Abstract

Bible translation workers face a major challenge in finding ways to engage preliterate communities with Scripture. Traditional translation methods take a long time and depend on literacy to function. Studies have shown that 80% of the world's population are oral learners. This paper shows how local communities can engage with the Scripture by creating animated videos of Bible stories using free software and public domain resources. I will discuss the methods used to create these animated videos as well as the benefits and challenges of using digital media in remote communities.

We are using oral translation of Bible stories to engage in the work of Scripture translation with the Central Pame of Mexico. This allows the community to gain access to the Biblical stories sooner than if they waited for a traditional written translation. The addition of digital media engages both adults and children with the stories in a way that print media and oral stories alone cannot. This method not only creates engagement and linguistic pride, but it has created a desire to see a written translation of the Scripture in the local community.

Introduction

Bible translation workers face a major challenge in finding ways to engage preliterate communities with Scripture. Traditional translation methods take a long time and depend on literacy to function. Studies have shown that 80% of the world's population are oral learners (ION 2017). This paper shows how local communities can engage with the Scripture by creating animated videos of Bible stories using free software and public domain resources. I will discuss the methods used to create these animated videos as well as the benefits and challenges of using digital media in remote communities.

Background

The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 10:17 that “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (NKJV). The vast majority of people in the world are oral learners. “In spite of the extensive literacy programs as well as the formal and informal education systems around the world, the number of oral communicators is steadily increasing” (Box 2014: 189). In previous generations of Bible translation, we have considered the task of translation to be intertwined with the concept of literacy; however, Kroneman says that “there seems to be a growing dissatisfaction with the results of vernacular literacy efforts as a basis for vibrant, effective scripture use and scripture engagement ... In many cases, direct oral communication seems to be

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more effective than print-based communication” (2017: 41-42). Digital storytelling combines the elements of an oral story, which is typically told in a culturally appropriate way to make the story natural as well as digital media, which makes it attractive to children and adults alike. Whenever a film or video is shown, a crowd of people typically congregates to find out what is happening. People engage with the film. This provides an appeal that printed materials alone does not have.

I am not suggesting that we should leave traditional print media behind. I believe that we should embrace a balanced approach that takes into account the countless people who through choice or circumstance will not be able to interact with God’s Word in a print format. “A Bible translation program that begins with the oral presentation of the Bible through storytelling and continues with a translation and literacy program is the comprehensive strategy for communicating the Word of God in the heart language” (LCWE & IO, Lovejoy, 2005). If we include oral translation products into what we offer to indigenous communities, then we strengthen the effectiveness of the printed products. The oral translation of stories allows the community to have access to the message sooner and also creates interest and engagement with the scriptures that traditional print media does not.

The first complete book printed on Gutenberg’s printing press was the Gutenberg Bible. The movable type printing press was brand new technology. It changed the world. We see the same thing happening today. Digital media is the new technology that is transforming the world. Many people today stay connected with news and entertainment through digital content. We need to be willing to take advantage of this new technology in order to reach others with the gospel message. The traditional print format is static. Digital is dynamic and often interactive. Smeda, et. al. concluded that digital storytelling allows students to enjoy deep and meaningful learning (2014). The world around us is changing. It is no longer sufficient to simply produce print materials and hope that people will use them and engage with the Scriptures. Philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey is quoted as having said, “If we teach today’s students as we taught yesterday’s, we rob them of tomorrow.” If we limit the Scriptures to a written format, then we are excluding certain people from ever having the ability to directly interact with the Scriptures. When we include oral scriptures in what we offer to the indigenous communities where we work, we allow those who may never have access to the written word to encounter the Gospel message in a format that they are able to understand.

Even in indigenous communities in the mountains of Mexico, the digital revolution has arrived. When we arrived in our language area three years ago, nobody had cell phones or tablets. Then about a year and a half ago, cell phones and tablets arrived. Suddenly everyone under the age of 40 has cell phones, tablets, and social media. We must be willing to adapt our approach to the changing world around us.

Our Project

A traditional translation project started among the Central Pame in the 1940s. A lot of time and effort was poured into the project by several linguists from SIL. However, when we arrived three years ago, nobody in the community was able to read or write in Pame. There were print materials that had been produced by the previous workers. The materials were stored in the church but untouched. For whatever reason, literacy in the vernacular had not taken hold.

Our project was chosen to participate in an Orality training that involved the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptists, the Seed Company, and UNTI (a Mexican indigenous translation organization). Our team of five participated in five, one-week training workshops on how to elaborate oral translations of stories from the Bible. The team had the assistance of experienced indigenous translators from UNTI, who taught and encouraged the team throughout the process. The Seed Company provided a consultant who was available to assist with questions and doubts related to original languages. The IMB facilitated the course with a participatory method of instruction in the process of how to elaborate the stories while anchoring them to the passages of Scripture. The end result was 19 stories from the Bible translated into Pame. As part of the process, the team recorded each of the stories in Pame so that they would have a “master copy” of the oral stories to refer back to when needed. The push of the training though was not to have an audio recording to use but to use the stories by telling them.

The oral stories have been well received among the Pame. Many people were interested in hearing the stories because they were told in a way that was consistent with their culture. Also, the stories were interesting. People wanted to learn the stories so that they could go out to other communities to retell these stories. In addition, we began to see momentum growing in the desire of the people to have a completed translation of the New Testament.

In the meantime, I had been told by a colleague about Max7.org. It is an online repository of free Bible resources that includes animations and videos of stories from the Bible. Many of them are set up so that you can download the video, music/sound effects, and audio as separate files. This allows the resources to be easily adapted into indigenous languages. When I found a video that fit with one of the stories that the team had already recorded, I simply adjusted the audio to fit the timing of the video. Then with the assistance of several of the team members we made final adjustments to make sure that the audio truly fit with the video, verifying that nothing was missing from the audio that was present in the video and vice versa. After making the final adjustments, we began showing it to people who were not a part of the process of creating the audio recording or the video.

The Process

All of the software that I used in the production of the animated videos is freely available at no cost. I used Audacity for editing the audio files. Audacity is a free, open source, cross-platform audio software for multi-track recording and editing. It can be downloaded from their website www.audacityteam.org at no cost. I used Windows Movie Maker for editing the video.

Windows Movie Maker is a video editing software that was developed by Microsoft. It was discontinued in January of 2017 and is no longer supported by Microsoft, but it can still be used. There are also other options for free video editing software available on the internet. Shotcut is a free video editing software program similar to Windows Movie Maker, which is available at <https://www.shotcut.org/>. VSDC Free Editor is available at <http://www.videosoftdev.com/free-video-editor>.

As I mentioned previously, we already had stories recorded and saved in mp3 format. I imported those files into Audacity and adjusted the spacing of the audio to match with the pace of the video. If the video footage was too short, I was able to slow down the video footage to make it last longer to fit with the timing of the audio. This was done inside of Movie Maker.

Challenges

There are several challenges that we face in our effort to produce digital scripture products. One is the lack of high quality videos. I worked with the audio recordings that we already had available and found several videos that were of good quality and fit with the stories that were available. Through Max7.org I was able to contact the original producer of the animated video for the “Jesus calms the storm” story. He is an animator based out of India, who has a master’s degree in animation. He said that one of the reasons that he had not produced more videos was because of the lack of funding (P. Chrispugg personal communication, Jan 18, 2017). We have to be willing to invest resources in order to have high quality digital content. Another challenge is in training people in the indigenous area so that they can be involved in the production of the materials. This would allow for the teams to produce content that is culturally appropriate and tailored to their settings. Even though technology is reaching these remote areas, there is still a gap in their technical knowledge, and they would need training in this area. An additional challenge that thankfully we have not encountered is that some cultures consider animated cartoons to imply that the story is not a true story. This would cause members of that culture to think that the stories that we are sharing are fictional stories for children, rather than being true stories from the Word of God.

Results

The people in our language community have only ever interacted with media in Spanish or English. When we created an animated video in Pame, it was well received. The children who first watched it were mesmerized and excited. The first time that I showed the video to the pastor that we work with, his 12-year-old daughter quickly began yelling excitedly for her younger brother to come watch the video because it was in Pame. When it ended, they asked us to show it again and again. Willis Ott says that “an audio version of Scripture has two special qualities that make it effective: it is very natural in its style and vocabulary; and the listeners are learning in their natural accustomed mode of learning” (Ott 2016: 61). This statement was confirmed in that moment.

The pastor has the videos on his tablet now. He not only uses it to show his children so that they can watch a Bible story in their heart language, but he also shows the videos in other communities as a visual support to the preaching that he does. These oral translations of the stories have been incorporated into preaching and teaching opportunities in the surrounding communities.

The folks that we work with shared the video on social media. This allowed them to share the video with friends and family who live in the U.S. and are not currently around speakers of their language. They also used Bluetooth to share the video from smart phone to smart phone. Occasionally, when we share the video in a new community, we discover that it had already been shared by someone else who had gotten the video from someone else’s phone.

Recently, the first person who received Christ in our language community passed away. During her funeral, her daughter stood up and shared about how much her mother cherished listening to the Bible stories in Pame. Her mother was illiterate and unable to see well due to cataracts, but

she loved to listen to the stories. Her daughter would tell her the stories that she had learned from the Orality team. While I mourn her passing, I was encouraged to hear that these stories had touched her in a meaningful way. Changed lives are the reason that we do what we do.

Our hope is not just to have entertaining videos of Bible stories in the local language. Our aim is to use these videos as a strategic tool in the overall project, which includes digital books as well as traditional print media. We have also begun to create digital reading apps, using Reading App Builder, for the stories that have been completed. The enthusiastic reception that the community has given to these videos has been encouraging. I often get asked when a new video is going to be produced.

For sample videos in the Pame language, see

Jesus Calms the Storm: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxLAKKg3nOg&t=7s>

Jairus' Daughter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Viw779vgZQY&t=3s>

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