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## Viral Good News - Letting go of our most valuable resources

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### 'Be smarter than a fly' - case study

'Be smarter than a fly' is a 5 part video narrative about the birth, life and death of Jesus as seen through the eyes of flies.<sup>i</sup> We saw that it was important to tell the story from a new perspective in a way children had not seen before. We started our brief with the audience, Australian children. We really wanted to engage 7-11 year olds in the story, particularly boys. Knowing that boys generally love the absurd, unusual and the disgusting, we brainstormed all the places that flies would turn up in Jesus life. His birth in the stable with animals...this was obvious. Flies hang around food scraps... we could see Jesus feeding the 5000 could be an important story. We continued until we had 5 events in Jesus life and were confident the content was good. The result; 5 short, punchy stories of Jesus time on earth, which made children laugh and think and ask questions. They would be short, approximately 60 seconds each, so that interest was maintained.



The 5 short videos were designed to go 'viral'.<sup>ii</sup> That is to say that we wanted children to email them to each other, post them on social networking sites and respond to them. We put them on YouTube, Max7 and Bible Society websites and wondered what would happen. Well... very little did happen when compared to other major viral video successes. We got thousands of hits rather than millions.

## Why?

With any project on the internet the development time needs to be shorter and shorter because the internet is progressing and morphing so quickly. It is like hitting a moving target. We would do many things differently now.. Successful viral videos need to fulfill a number of criterion and if any of these boxes are not ticked it is unlikely that it will 'go viral' and reach millions.

- Firstly, and probably most importantly we didn't optimize the chances of the video succeeding using internet technology and culture. Influential bloggers and alpha users<sup>iii</sup> are the gatekeepers on what will be 'cool' (the next big thing) on the net. To make a video viral you need to get it recognized by an influential blogger who will then recommend and pass it on to their huge networks. How many influential Christian bloggers are there? It also needs to be optimized in search engines to appear at the top of searches such as Google, Yahoo and YouTube.
- The content and style of the video is also vital. The popular ones have captured people's imaginations because they are original or funny. Many seem to be based on dance and movement, maybe because they transcend language and everyone can enjoy them.
- The videos need to be short and punchy.
- The more amateurish the product the better because it is seen as authentic. Shaky cameras and unguarded moments are much more believable. Consumers tend to be suspicious of highly produced, professional products. This is where we would do things differently next time. Our animations were probably too professional and 'Disney' in their appearance.
- The other key factor is that the videos raised questions — then had a 'professor' explain the answers from the Bible. This was a requirement from the Bible agency that commissioned the works but it was a technique that I don't think works with post-modern thinkers on the internet. We, as Christians, are sometime nervous about raising questions and arousing curiosity without providing the answers. New Bible engagement requires risk.

## Why did we attempt this project?

Why not create a product in a traditional way for tried and tested distribution techniques. There is no doubt that we are in the age of information technology. The internet's power and reach is growing at an incredible rate. There are more than 1.6 billion people with access the World Wide Web.<sup>iv</sup> This represents 24% of the world's population. The internet is a marketplace of ideas. Many of the ideas are frivolous and secular but it is a smorgasbord none the less and people are very engaged in these ideas.

## **How then, should Christians be involved on the internet?**

Do we make the internet a new bulletin board for the church, announcing to passers-by the Biblical truth wrapped in wit? Do we use it as a shop selling resources to those interested? Many current Christian models tend to invite Internet surfers to come and visit their site and get what they need. There is little true engagement. Our attitude is; 'We have prepared a few things here and you can visit us and have a look and even take some away with you.' This is an old model of communication based on Web 1.0.<sup>v</sup> It is carefully controlled, static, and unresponsive to the end user. Many church models of using the internet tend to be based on this.

## **How can Christians respond to the challenge of the internet? How do we have an authentic presence in this virtual digital world?**

I think we must stop trying to invite people to our sites to show them things but be salt and light in their 'places'. Where are their places? One of the fastest growing areas on the internet is the social networking sites like Facebook<sup>vi</sup>, MySpace<sup>vii</sup> and Twitter<sup>viii</sup>. With the convergence of technology in these applications there is enormous power in social networking platforms. These sites are amazingly efficient communication tools, data storage, address books, media collection and sharing tools. Each month they become more useful for the user.

## **What content or product can Christians offer in their 'places' that will pique their interest and help people make positive responses to Jesus?**

We have spent a great deal of time and resources preparing people to go into other cultures to learn and translate Scripture, to evangelize and to plant churches.

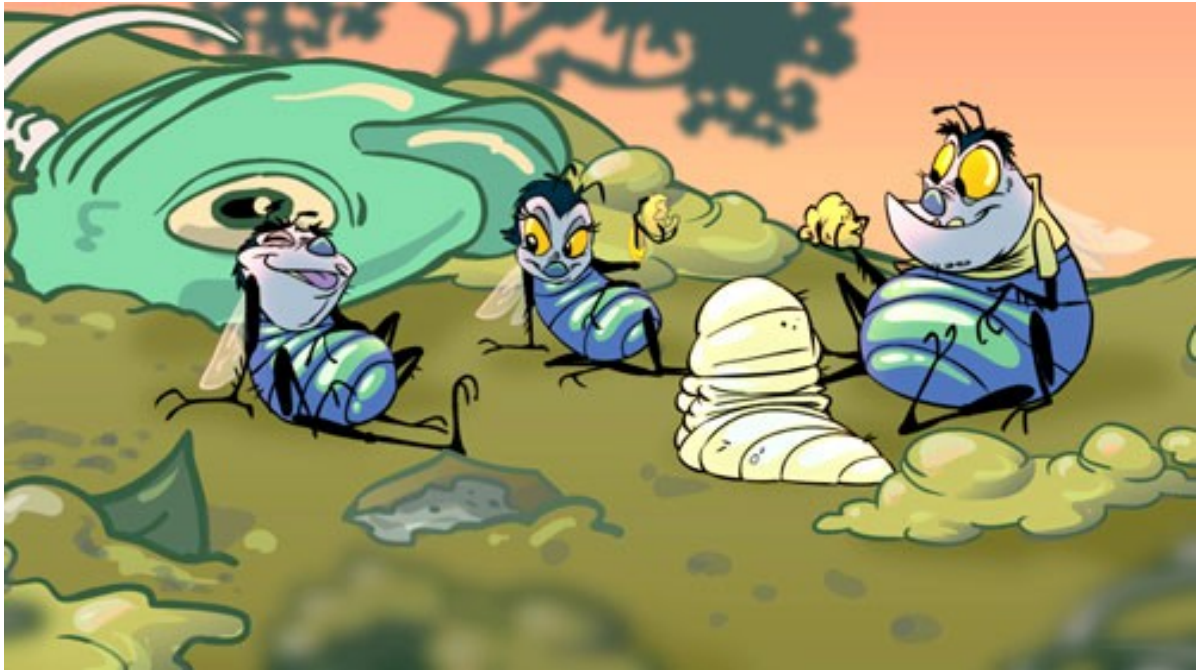
- Should we not prepare Christians to be adept in this new virtual culture on the internet? If those who use Facebook represented a country, it would be the 4<sup>th</sup> largest in the world.<sup>ix</sup>
- What would an Internet Evangelist, Christian media producer or Online Minister look like? What skills would they need? How might their role keep adapting to changing technology?

Much of the power and authority in the Christian church is held by people who have little understanding of the internet. Those under 20 are 'digital natives'<sup>x</sup> — fearless and proficient in manipulating the media with understanding of its structure and potential. It is these young people we must harness to help Christians be salt and light on the internet social networking sites. We need new thinking and clever understanding of the power and pitfalls of this technology. I think the best way to produce relevant content by Christians for the internet is to give digital tools and resources and spiritual guidance to children and teenagers and see what happens.

## **Caveat**

The Christian faith is all about relationships. The internet can only be a step to reach-out and to awaken someone's interest. It is great for catching up with news and planning times together. However, I believe that ultimately the internet needs to bring us together face to face. Christians

cannot remain solely in the virtual landscape. Jesus' body, the church, is people meeting and living their lives together. The internet can enhance this but it cannot replace it satisfactorily.



## Further reading and study

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<sup>i</sup> See <http://www.max7.org> or <http://www.youtube.com> and search for “R U Smarter than a Fly”.

<sup>ii</sup> Viral videos- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viral\\_videos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viral_videos)

<sup>iii</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_marketing\\_intelligence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_marketing_intelligence)

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>(Oct 2009)

<sup>v</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web\\_1.0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_1.0)

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.myspace.com/>

<sup>viii</sup> <http://twitter.com/>

<sup>ix</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook>

<sup>x</sup> [Marc Prensky](#) is acknowledged to have coined the term *digital native* in his work *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants* published in 2001.

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This document was first made available as a report of a workshop held at the World Wide Scripture Engagement Consultation in Malaysia in October 2009. It is now available for download at: <http://www.scripture-engagement.org>

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