

Digital Dialogue

Daring to stay relevant in an era of information overload

Andreas Ernst, 2021

In 2013, a young man made a video in his mother tongue with the title *The Monkey, Who Wanted to Be A Lion*, a story about pretending to be a Christian, while not being inwardly transformed.

The video was shared with friends and family via Bluetooth. At the time there were very few smartphones in use in the area, and WhatsApp was still unheard of. Six months later, as he travelled to a city 200 km away from his language community, another youth showed him the same video with great excitement, not knowing that he was talking to the creator of that video.



Video on YouTube: https://youtu.be/6ny2jX_ppBk

I wonder what aspect of this story has caught your attention. Perhaps you are excited about the use of stories or of technology to convey a message, or curious about the sociolinguistic factors that have led to the sharing of the video. At the time, this testimony encouraged me to continue building local media capacity, but it also left a nagging question in me, which I think is still relevant today: Did the excitement over this video enhance or distract from its message? Did it have any lasting value? Technology has evolved, but one question remains: How can Christian organizations interact meaningfully with people who are increasingly swamped with digital information?

SIL's Digital Scripture Access & Engagement Strategy report (2020) tells us that media approaches must "take into account all parts of the picture, rather than creating products and hoping that others will develop a strategy for their distribution, promotion and engagement."

Similarly, Scott Brasecker warns us that while wanting to bear fruit that lasts, “our fixation with measuring short-term gains at superficial levels simply means that the barrage of numbers in our annual reports are sometimes only giving us phantom signs of health.” In other words, effective media is not about the right products or numbers, but about the quality of interaction with people. But what does this really mean? In what follows, I hope to highlight three key principles which can help us assess how engaging our media approaches are. Not surprisingly, they are the same principles that apply to keeping up conversations and relationships.

1. Listening well

“Communication is not unidirectional – it is both transmitted and received. It is not only about getting our voice heard, but also hearing and understanding others. People need to be able to deal critically with communication that they receive, and they need to actively develop, reproduce and use alternative forms of communication.” (REFLECT International)

The first observation I would like to make has to do with how information overload affects people. Today most of us are connected with more people and bombarded with more information than ever before, and the resulting social expectations and information overload can be exhausting. Media research has shown that such information fatigue leads people to increasingly prioritize media that is ‘emotionally gratifying’. Also known as the ‘Uses and Gratifications Approach’, this tendency of selective attention shows that

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humans have a limited capacity for taking in information and a natural habit of filtering out excess information, whether consciously or unconsciously. In other words, if we want to engage people, we need to ask, “What makes it through their information filters”?

In a society that has become distrusting towards media, one of the key elements of effective engagement is establishing trust. In the words of Seth Godin, we live in ‘a moment in time when more people are connected and few are trusted’. In fact, Julia Campbell, expert in social media for non-profit, argues that ‘facts and truth are endangered’, because we ‘live in an age where science, data, and research are persistently challenged and absurdly politicized’. Her conclusion: ‘The fact that our message has reached even more people does not mean that these people are listening to us.’ Nevertheless, she goes on to say that ‘we have the ability like never before to influence global conversations around social justice, inequality, poverty, climate change, and other hot button issues. When used strategically, the connection and reach afforded by social media and the potential to persuade as well as mobilize is unparalleled.’ What does her optimism lie in? It lies in the fact that when we listen well, trust is established: ‘Nonprofits have a moral obligation to engage authentically on social media, both to increase trust in institutions, and to connect people with the causes and issues they care most about. We need the voice of the third sector to advocate for those who don’t have a voice.’ This also affects language! She goes on to say: ‘Speak your target audience’s language! Write down their answers to your questions, and their comments using their words – not what you think they should be saying, or the words that you want them to use.’

This is not some new trick in the box for influencing ‘target’ audiences. Being intentional about using media to give voice to others is simply good practice. It is also the only ethically sound and sustainable way to empower the marginalized communities we serve. As ‘media globalization diminishes freedom of information and restricts the diversity of information’, we must learn from the experience of development and human rights organizations who have for many years continued to highlight the ‘ill effects of one-way, vertical communication processes’ while fighting for ‘horizontal communication, people’s participation and indigenous knowledge’. We must first and foremost strive for media approaches and services which give voice to others.

2. Telling good stories

The second key element in engaging audiences lies in good storytelling. Perhaps this is not surprising, considering that Jesus used a narrative approach extensively in his teaching. However, engaging listeners through the art of storytelling remains highly relevant in the digital age. Eugene Peterson observes that ‘our contemporary unbiblical preference, both inside and outside of the church, is for information over story’. He explains that ‘story is the primary verbal means of bringing God’s word to us. For that we can be most grateful, for story is our most accessible form of speech. Young and old love stories. Literate and illiterate alike tell and listen to stories. Neither stupidity not sophistication puts us outside the magnetic field of story.’ In the same vein, Julia Campbell observes the importance of storytelling in engaging audiences: ‘You can’t force people to join your movement – you can only entice their curiosity and then invite them in on their terms.’ This means that ‘nonprofit marketers need to think of themselves as journalists and documentarians’, because what is required is ‘drawing interesting, unexpected and great storytelling out of people’. She adds that ‘digital marketing success requires grit, authenticity, and the willingness to take risks. There is a science to it, but a lot of experimentation, humor, and edu-tainment’ (education – entertainment).

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Media practitioners have known and harnessed the power of edutainment for many years. Educational radio drama and soap operas have proved to be highly effective because of the identification of audiences with the stories that reflect their own lives. Similarly, advertisement relies heavily on entertainment-education. In other words, if we add storytelling to listening well, we learn that giving voice is about listening long enough to hear somebody’s story, recording it, sharing it. The result is that we become grounded in real life events, partners with others in exploring the need for and impact of God’s love in their

lives. Distrust slowly begins to fade away, and God’s love, warnings and promises become tangible. I must add a warning though. Entertainment has become an addiction. This means that as Christians, listening to and telling people’s stories must take place with respect and dignity. Among other things this means that storytelling should happen in the context for the context. It is the context that makes stories meaningful and powerful. If we disrespect this principle, we easily fall into the trap of producing mere reality entertainment. The increasing hunger for reality TV and soap operas has created a huge and brutally exploited market for

programs with spiritually destructive content. In fact, Vokes points out that even the real-life grievances and suffering of others are increasingly being used for entertainment purposes, following the motto 'If it bleeds it leads!' Such communication practices reinforce a negative view of people and circumstances, holding people captive in a vicious cycle. To make a difference, as Christians we have the privilege of listening to and sharing the stories of the Bible as well as the powerful real-life testimonies of God at work in the lives of his people, both in good and bad times. We do this not to entertain, but to bring hope and encourage.

3. Faithfulness

'Clearly efforts to motivate resistant people groups with religious messages must involve a long term effort.' Henrich, D. J.

'Persistence is also a key element of social marketing. Indeed, from the very beginning, social marketers have always stressed the importance of long-term engagement.' Julia Campbell.

Keeping up meaningful relationships is hard without continuity. The same is true for media efforts. In other words, we cannot expect that 'getting a media production out there' will have much long-term impact on anyone without ongoing dialogue. The number one thing that influences people are people, not products. That is why media strategies are tricky. It is very possible to get the products right, as well as achieving numbers and regularity in uploading videos, apps, updates and blog posts, while still missing the point. Unfortunately, it seems that some of our thinking about communication strategies is influenced by commercial marketing strategies. In commercial marketing, the product is designed for a specific felt need and it speaks for itself. Getting the product bought and used mostly involves getting the information out regularly enough for end users to notice it, either through advertisement or the positive feedback of those we trust. Once a product is sold, companies hope for customer satisfaction, while committing only to responding to serious complaints, if at all. In his book *Looking Good, Being Bad*, Adrian Plass illustrates how commercializing Christianity leads to some pretty absurd behavior. Nevertheless, as Christian organizations, we continue to be influenced by the idea that our success in society depends on our products, our market value. However, God's message is not a product. He is not a service, which we either like or don't like. As Eugene Petersen observes, 'Not everyone who gets interested in the Bible and even gets excited about the Bible wants to get involved with God.'

Bessenecker warns us that 'The problem is that my ego will always drive me toward the wide audience, even when the Spirit calls me to the narrow one.' Making many superficial relationships is easy, but we often do not find the motivation in us for pursuing individuals at a deeper level. It takes more effort, more grace, more love. However, what God has to offer is a deep relationship. Establishing deep relationships is risky business in a distrusting world, and establishing such relationships requires feeling pursued for who one is. It involves progressively taking a risk, at a great personal cost. This takes time. In other words, the message of the love of God cannot be marketed to the masses. Rather, it is discovered through the experience of others

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faithfully reaching out to us, being available to us when we need them. In non-profit social media marketing, Julie Campbell encourages communicators to follow-up with individuals by calling them on the phone and talking to them personally at in-person events. Why? Because transformative relationships take time and perseverance. If humanistic media practitioners are willing to go the extra mile to bring about positive change, how much more should we as Christians seek for media formats, which faithfully reach out to even just a few?

Concluding questions

In our communication with the people we serve, how intentional are we about listening to their concerns as well as their stories? How faithfully do we keep up conversations with even just a few people or facilitate such conversations? Today, a number of media formats such as face-to-face or virtual listening groups, social media groups, call-in radio debates, participatory radio drama, or participatory film development make it possible to engage with people at a personal level and on an ongoing basis. These formats enable marginalized communities and individuals to express their views and concerns, as well as allowing us to accompany them over time in their faith. How are we making use of these opportunities?

May the Lord guide us as we seek to keep up the digital dialogue!

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