

Technology in Ministry

Birch Champeon

A modern day corollary of Ps. 20:7 could be “Some *trust* in computers, and some in cell phones: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God.”

Growing up in the 80s, technology was just reaching into our daily lives. I still remember when members of our church would not shop at stores that had barcode readers, because they associated it with the mark of the beast. When I was 15, I was not close to the Lord. I was looking everywhere except at the childhood dream I had of being a missionary. I told my father that I wanted to study computers and he explained to me that he didn't feel there was a lot of future in computers. I went to a christian college graduated with a degree in computer science. Immediately after graduation, I took a secular job at a small software company. Around the same time, I took a missions trip to an very remote island in Venezuela. For two weeks we had no phones, no personal electronics, no running water, and limited power from a generator. I was happier than I had been in years. My first task upon arrival was to fix a Bible translator's laptop. After that time, even though I continued working at my secular job, God changed my focus. Six years later I was a missionary traveling all over the world training translators how to use the computer for Bible Translation.

At Bibles International we use computers to speed up the process of translation while improving the accuracy of the translated text. During the 70s my parents-in-law translated the NT into Macushi, a tribal language on the Amazon in Brazil. They estimate that they typed the NT 12 times during the process of translation.

Today, computers allow us to edit the text “in-place”. Only the correction has to be typed which in and of itself has saved us a huge amount of time and effort. But the computer is much more than a glorified typewriter. It can process large amounts of information that we can use to compare text to itself to easily increase the accuracy of a translation.

The average Bible translation takes 20 years to complete. During the 7-10 years that it takes to translate the New Testament, the translator is getting much more experienced at his work. This experience allows him to make better word choices toward the end of the translation. Bibles International has a huge list of Greek “key terms”. For instance we want to compare every verse that has the word “sin” in it. We used to take this list of thousands of references and look up each one by hand in a huge computer printout. But with the computer we can look up all those verses put them one after the other and all the translator to compare the verses very quickly by comparing the list. It is this sort of processing power that allows us to truly leverage the computer's strength.

One of the most important checks that we use for checking our translator's work is the “back translation”. This is a word for word, interlinear of the translated text into English, French, or Spanish. We used to do have a translator's assistant hand write every gloss of every word through every book of the Bible. So imagine how many times they had to translate articles and conjunctions or just the word “God”. Now we use a program called Adapt-it to do a word for word interlinear back translation of the translators text. Adapt-it remembers the word you choose each time you translate it. So the next time you come to that word, Adapt-it will insert the word that you have already translated.

A big step in the last 5 years has been the use of projectors. Previously, when we would have as many as 6 people working on the translation team, the translators would have printouts of the book that was being corrected. One person would be at the laptop and he would take the corrections from the team. Once a verse

had been rearranged or reworded the printouts became useless. The verse would have to be read and re-read from the computer as further corrections were made. Now we use a projector for this type of situation. The edited text is projected on the wall and everyone can see it as it is corrected. It is truly a beautiful thing to see a team all working from the same text. One member will notice the spelling mistakes, another will be sensitive to the flow of the sentence, another will see that the section heading is formatted incorrectly – all of this is possible because of the availability of cheap, fairly durable, low power projectors.

In the last 3 years we have been working on software specifically designed for Bible translators. While there are a few different Bible translation editors out there, Bibles International has chosen to use an editor called Bibledit. Bibledit gives the translator accuracy checking tools within the same software that the translated text is typed into. This means that as they are typing the text they can very easily check to see what word they used the last time they translated some obscure Greek term. Instead of waiting for me or another missionary to come run the checks for them, they can run the checks themselves.

My other responsibility is training translators to use the computer for Bible translation. This starts with basic computer care and protection, understanding the threat of viruses, and how Windows works. Then we quickly move to using Bibledit to correct and continue their translation work. After a few months of work with Bibledit we begin to train them how to use the checking tools within the program so they can take advantage of those.

We also use technology beyond just Bible translation. As missionaries we use our computers for much of our communication with our supporters. We used to have a static website, then we had a blog, and now we have found Facebook to be the most effective. We also keep an extra computer for short-termers who can do simple repetitive tasks that need to be done for the ministry. And we use software like E-sword and Bibleworks for Biblical study and research.

While technology can be very useful, we must be aware that it can become an obstacle as well. There are many questions that must be asked before adopting a new technology or even something as simple as bringing some new “toy” (iPad) from America.

Here are some questions to ask before introducing technology into a situation:

- ⤴ What is the purpose of this technology
 - Is there a specific reason you need this equipment?
- ⤴ Is it usable?
 - Do they have power, printer ink, air conditioners, etc
- ⤴ Is it sustainable?
 - What will happen when this fails? Do they have parts and technicians?
- ⤴ Is it better?
 - Is this just technology for the sake of technology? What part of the process is this going to improve? Will it really improve it?
- ⤴ Are you willing to do the setup or pay for it?
 - Do you have the money? Do you have the time?
- ⤴ Are you willing to train everyone that needs to use it?

- Do you have training materials? Do you know who will need training? Do you know what they will need to be taught?
- ▲ What are the risks of this technology for the ministry?
 - Are your national co-workers ready for unrestricted high speed internet access? Have you prepared them? Are you ready to follow up with them throughout the adoption process? Will there be a temptation to jealousy or materialism because of this technology?

And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations. And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations. Luke 16:8-9

We must use the tools that God has given us in this age, but we can't use those tools in such a way that we threaten the cause of Christ.

Recommended Resources:

www.bibleedit.org

www.adapt-it.org

www.charityministries.org/pdf/2007-10-technology.pdf

Birch has been the Technical Coordinator for Bibles International since 2001. He develops software to assist with Bible translation and has worked in S.E. Asia, South America and Africa training nationals to use technology to assist with their Bible translation projects. In addition to training in technology, he has conducted training for national colleagues on numerous topics from time management to family issues. He and his wife, Connie, have twin sons. Much of the time they are able to travel as a family and minister together.