

Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Use of Social Media

A case study



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Introduction

In 1996, my first year at university, I was one of the few people on my course who had used e-mail. Our assignments could still be hand written and when we wanted to call home there would usually be a line of people waiting to use the payphone at the bottom of the stairs. Three years later, at my graduation, I could either call or text my friends on my 'mobile' phone and as we parted we shared e-mail addresses to keep in touch in the future.

Today, 13 years later, when I want to contact friends I can text, Twitter, e-mail, Facebook, Skype or call them. I rarely write a letter, it costs too much to send and takes too long to get to its destination. On a daily basis I read the thoughts and opinions of business leaders and friends, politicians and Wycliffe members, based all around the world, without having to leave the comfort of my desk. Although, if I wanted to get out and about, my mobile phone will allow me to search websites and read e-mail, I could even call someone if I really wanted to.

Over the last 10 years the variety and reach of new communications tools has changed more quickly than at any other time in human history. Never before has there been so much opportunity to reach such a vast number of people, to engage them in a vision and to stir them to action.

I am going to share with you a few of the ways in which Wycliffe Bible Translators UK has been using Social Media ^[1] to communicate with our audience, share our vision and reach new people. Hopefully, our story will be a real inspiration to you.

How Wycliffe UK uses Social Media: the big picture

The aim

One of the most interesting things about Social Media, is that it connects people who otherwise would never come into contact with each other. In my life Seth Godin is a very influential man. I've not met him in person but I regularly read his [blog](#) ^[2]. In 2008 he published a book called Tribes, in which he says,

"A movement is thrilling. It's the work of many people, all connected, all seeking something better. The new highly leveraged tools of the Net make it easier than ever to create a movement, to make things happen, to get things done." (Godin, 2009, page 4).

That's what we are aiming for with Wycliffe, a movement of connected people, inspired by the desire to see God's word in the hands of all people, in the language that they understand the best. Growing and developing this movement of people is something that Social Media is helping us to do. We no longer have to travel miles and meet everyone face-to-face, although, it's always nice when we can do. Instead, communications technology allows us to share our thoughts, opinions, our hopes and our dreams and connect groups which otherwise would never have made contact.

Planning to use Social Media

Before getting too much into the question of 'what we do', it's important to answer 'why' and explain some of the decisions that have influenced our implementation of Social Media.

In practice, Social Media works best when multiple channels are used. In other words, what takes place on the blog doesn't just stay on the blog, it gets shared across Twitter, Facebook pages and other social networks that I don't even know about. This is the strength of Social Media. If I read something I like on someone else's blog I may well share that post on my Facebook profile or publish it on Twitter. In this way that one blog post reaches a far wider audience than it would have done on its own as each individual shares it with their own audience.

At Wycliffe in the UK, Social Media is part of an overall communications plan. Twitter, Facebook and blogging are all separate communications channels which are used alongside more traditional media, such as our print materials, press releases and website. Using the new tools to support and complement our established means of communication helps us to reach a wider audience and build relationships.

It is the personal support of these various audiences which give authority to what has become known as User Generated Content (UGC). In the world of Social Media it's not the corporate voice that drives the agenda, instead it is the opinions, view-points and conversations of individuals. Because of this, Social Media is best not viewed as a corporate mouthpiece.

Now, that's not to say that at Wycliffe we don't run a corporate Wycliffe blog or Twitter account for communicating with supporters, we do. However, our aim is to engage individuals outside of the organisation with individuals inside of the organisation. If that occasionally allows us to share a more 'corporate' message with followers then all the better, but the main focus should be to link up like-minded individuals.

Why? Well, let's be honest, people don't build up relationships with organisations. Relationships are built up between people. It's the strength of these relationships between people which allows organisations to occasionally butt into the conversation with their own message.

This is probably a good place to talk some more about generating content. The success of Social Media is in allowing users to generate the content (UGC). At Wycliffe we spend surprisingly little time on writing items, especially for the blog. Instead, most content is supplied by members who have their own blogs. This reduces the amount of staff time needed to manage this and allows a much wider variety of subjects to be covered.

Of course the important part of Social Media, and the element that makes it most exciting, is opening up dialogue by allowing followers to comment. Dialogue can be the part that requires the most time and attention, but this is about building relationships which can only be a blessing to an organisation looking to become a movement.

Dialogue also gives agencies such as ourselves, a way to communicate with supporters and find out what they are thinking or are concerned about. It allows us to gain more instant feedback and to discuss our views with a wider range of people.

The other spin-off from this is empowering staff to lead their own tribes. Say you enable 10 people to run their own blog. Encourage and empower them so that they can talk effectively about your organisation in their own way to their own tribe of people. They may then be able to influence 10 people themselves. Immediately that means that you have 100 people onboard with your tribe.

Even if those 10 people are the only people that you have time to engage with, the power of your communications is increasing, and going much further afield.

How Wycliffe UK uses Social Media: specifics

Blogs

www.wycliffe.org.uk/blog is a main communications tool for Wycliffe Bible Translators in the UK. It's used as a promotion tool for more traditional forms of communication, like announcing when the most recent edition of Words for Life (Wycliffe's magazine in the UK) or Call to Prayer (our bi-monthly newsletter) are released. We publicise press releases, which are frequently picked up by other blogs, increasing the reach of our stories.

But the blog also allows us to draw attention to Wycliffe members who blog. Directing readers to interesting blog posts by members working overseas or in UK roles allows us to talk more widely about the variety of things that we do and share the range of opinions that exist within Wycliffe.

Facebook

Facebook pages are a good way to connect people who are interested in a similar topic. However, to make a site worthwhile it requires dedicated time and input to keep information up-to-date. We are currently running a Facebook Page [3] for a few months as a trial to see if it's something worth pursuing.

What Facebook enables people to do more effectively, is network. Many Wycliffe staff, around the world, use Facebook to keep in contact with friends at home, share pictures, tell stories and talk about their life.

Facebook is a good example of how personal communications can work much more effectively than corporate messages and sites.

The limitation with Facebook is the decision by many people to only connect with people that they know or have met. While this means that connections between people are of a high quality, it can limit Facebook as a way of spreading information more broadly.

Twitter

Once again, Wycliffe UK has a corporate Twitter account @wycliffeuk which is managed centrally. There are also a number of Wycliffe staff on Twitter and it's possible to connect with a number of them under the hashtag [4] #wycliffeuk.

The #wycliffeuk also provides a direct feed of Tweets about Wycliffe to our website.

Video

YouTube is the web's second largest search engine, and a popular place to share stories. Not only does it make content visual, but it also allows people to take the video and add it to their own website. This gives Wycliffe some editorial control, as the content of the video remains fixed, but it also allows the message to be spread more widely by embedding the video, or links to the video, in blog posts or Facebook pages.

You can view Wycliffe's videos through their YouTube channel, WycliffeUK [5].

Podcasts

Podcasts are a bit of a dream for us at the moment. We have plenty of quality interview material and there's good, free, audio editing equipment available online which we can use to put Podcasts together. The challenge is finding the staff time to put programmes and interviews together.

An example

Below is a picture of the Wycliffe Blog from the 9th September 2009. Visible is an article about Eddie Arthur, Wycliffe's Executive Director, appearing on Peniel Church's Face to Face TV programme, [6] talking about Bible translation. Inserted in the blog post is a YouTube clip, and to the right of the post you can see that this has been 'retweeted' four times.

Bible translation with the Kouya
September 9th, 2009 by Mark

Wycliffe UK's Executive Director **Eddie Arthur** was recently interviewed on **Peniel Church's** Face to Face programme, where he discussed what God is currently doing around the world through Bible translation.

Eddie's personal testimony is a highlight, as he recounts how God called him and his wife to West Africa to serve with the Kouya people.

If you don't have time to listen to all four clips, I would say that the final one gives a great insight into what is involved in Bible translation on a day-to-day basis.

4 **boantz** retweet

Wycliffe UK on Twitter

- » #wycliffeuk on facebook by the man who created it: @phil77 - <http://bit.ly/3r3sf2> a day ago
- » RT @Phil77 #WycliffeUK Page now up on Facebook <http://tinyurl.com/nckshu> it's still a bit raw, but there's a start 2 days ago
- » RT @kouya: Up early for an exciting week ahead. Discussing the Biblical basis for the future of Bible translation worldwide 3 days ago

Bible Translation Sites

- » Vision 2025
- » Wycliffe International
- » Wycliffe UK

English Bible Translations

- » Better Bibles Blog

People involved in Bible Translation

- » Andrew and Clare
- » Clarka and Alison
- » Eddie and Sue Arthur
- » Hazel Gray
- » John Hamilton

Wycliffe blog post
<http://wycliffe.org.uk/blog/?p=1342>

Wycliffe Twitter feed
<http://twitter.com/wycliffeuk>

Wycliffe UK on You Tube
Video:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1gqO0sIg7I>
Wycliffe UK Channel:
<http://www.youtube.com/user/WycliffeUK>

This page also includes a feed from Twitter. Anyone Twittering about Wycliffe and using '#wycliffeuk' will appear here.

This illustrates how we use a number of different Social Media to interact with each other and broaden the reach of our message.

Things to consider

Planning

Probably the worst thing you could do is plough straight in to using Facebook, Twitter, Bebo, MySpace, YouTube, and all the other Social Media devices, without taking the time out to think and plan what is right for you. Identifying opportunities, testing and reassessing are vital steps to ensure that you are doing the right things to be successful. You need to think carefully about what you want to achieve and plan the most effective way to reach that goal.

That said, using planning as an excuse for doing nothing is no longer acceptable. In another 10 years the face of communications is going to be very different from where it is today, but what takes place today is a step on that journey. Not being involved, not trying and learning will just mean that in 10 years you will be further behind and the next step will look more like the long jump.

Individual v Corporate voice

One of the great impacts of Social Media has been putting the message in the hands of the individual. Your customers, members, students and supporters can be more persuasive than the corporate voice of your organisation. People are no longer ignorant of marketing speak, they know when they are being sold to or fed a line. At Wycliffe we work to empower people to use Social Media to tell their story. Not the core message of the organisation, but the story of their lives. We all know how powerful personal testimony can be, Social Media allows those kinds of stories to reach masses of people and be shared worldwide.

With this comes some risk. Some level of control has to be given up in favour of your supporters posting their own comments and views. That said, if they are true supporters you won't have any problems, will you?

Good guidelines for staff members, are essential. They need to allow flexibility and not be too controlling, but they also need to consider that sometimes people make mistakes or phrase comments badly. We work a buddy system and make sure that things posted online are read by more than one person. We don't expect everything to be approved before publication, as that would slow the process down too much and be too cumbersome to manage, but we do give feedback and suggest changes where appropriate.

The future

The truth is, in terms of technology, we don't really know what the future holds. 10 years ago we wouldn't have been able to foresee the success of something like Twitter, so trying to make predictions for the next 10 years is a little tricky.

One thing I am sure of is that Social Media isn't about to disappear. Online communications are here to stay. What kind of form they are going to take is a little more difficult to predict, but chances are the links between mobile devices and the internet are going to become stronger rather than weaker. I am pretty sure that it won't be too long before most of our communications, online or otherwise, will be conducted through a portable communications device, like a mobile phone.

It would be wonderful to think that there will be a whole range of different Christian organisations using these tools to make their voice heard and generating their own movements of people.

Where next?

If you're interested in seeing how Wycliffe use Social Media, you can visit the blog at www.wycliffe.org.uk/blog, or look up @wycliffeuk on Twitter.

For people involved with mission organisations or churches, or for individuals who are interested in taking this further, we could arrange to spend half a day discussing how to implement a Communications Strategy that includes Social Media. This would also provide

the opportunity to network with people in similar roles. If you are interested please contact phil_prior@wycliffe.org.

Get Connected

There are a number of people associated with Wycliffe Bible Translators who can be found using Social Media. Below are details of how you can find their own blog or Twitter feed, but you will also find many of them on other social networks such as Facebook or LinkedIn:

Eddie Arthur, Executive Director

Blog: <http://kouya.net>

Twitter: @kouya

Phil Prior, Head of Marketing and Communications

Blog: <http://philprior.co.uk/mylife>

Twitter: @phil77

John Hamilton is Director of the Mobilisation team

Blog: <http://nornirn.wordpress.com>

Twitter: @john_nornirn

Mark Woodward, Member of the Mobilisation team and due to be moving to Tanzania within the next year

Website: <http://everytonque.co.uk>

Twitter: @woodwardmw

Matt and Liz Wisbey are Literacy workers in Tanzania

Blog: <http://wisbeys.blogspot.com>

Twitter: @thewisbys

Philip and Judy Hewer have been working in a community in Ghana

Blog: <http://hewersofwood.wordpress.com/>

Twitter: @hewersofwood

Steve and Johanna Pillinger only recently started blogging. Steve is a typesetter based in the UK

Blog: <http://pillingersj.co.uk/>

Stephanie Angus is based in Northern Ireland and manages some of the short-term mission programmes for the UK.

Blog: <http://upmytree.blogspot.com/>

Twitter: @stephanguis3

Tim Robinson: @timrobsund

Jens Meyer: @jenssammeyer

Kent Anderson: @kentanderson

Stephen Thomas: @Rumble60

Attila Kovacs: @attilakovacs

Kat Fairbairn: @KattheKat

Bibliography

Godin, S. (2009). *Tribes*. London: Piatkus.

Footnotes

[1] I'm assuming if you are reading this that you are already aware of Social Media, and terms such as blogging, Twittering, Skyping, etc, etc. If you're not then the Wikipedia page on Social Media is a good place to start reading up on the area, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media. While there are issues with using Wikipedia as a reference source, the explanations provided will be helpful for you to understand what's being discussed here.

[2] <http://sethgodin.typepad.com>

[3] <http://www.facebook.com/pages/High-Wycombe-United-Kingdom/Wycliffe-Bible-Translators-UK/116701839012?v=info#/pages/High-Wycombe-United-Kingdom/Wycliffe-Bible-Translators-UK/116701839012?v=wall&viewas=0>

[4] For more information about hashtags and how they are used by Twitter, <http://mashable.com/2009/05/17/twitter-hashtags/>

[5] <http://www.youtube.com/user/WycliffeUK>

[6] <http://www.penelfacetoface.com/home/television>

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