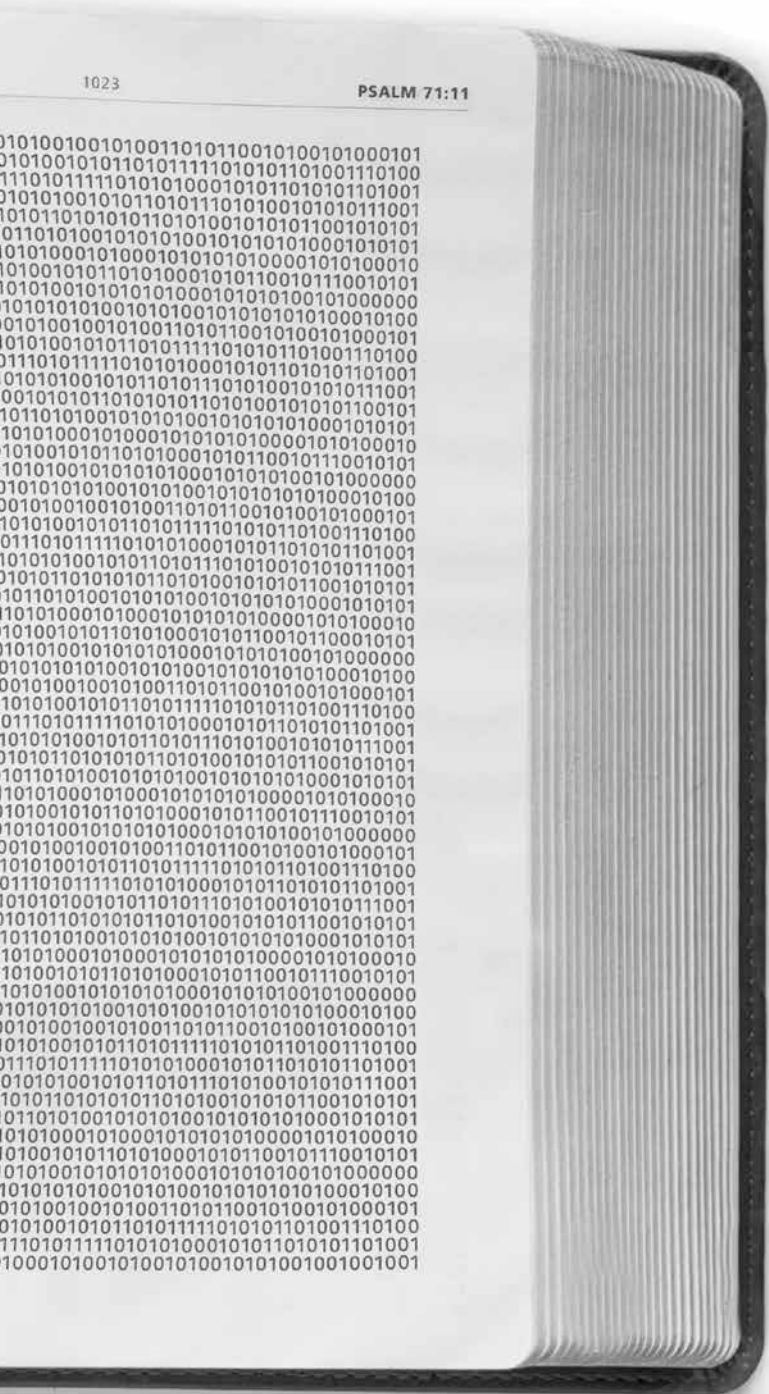# BIBLE TRANSLATION IN
THE DIGITAL AGE

BY **GILLES GRAVELLE**

The author of *Where Good Ideas Come from: The Natural History of Innovation*, says that "change happens when you take a configuration and rearrange it in new ways."[1] His point is that most new ideas are not the result of something coming from nothing. It has more to do with aggregating proven things and rearranging them in new ways for greater effects.

At certain points in history key technological innovations can be directly correlated with the accelerated growth of Bible translation. In the mid to late 19th century, typewriters, communications, and rapid transportation (relatively speaking) generated a lot of change, and Bible translation surged with that change. In the early 1980s, the personal computer brought affordable word processing and immediate printing capability to the masses. Ten years later, the internet and email revolutionized communications. These innovations accelerated the completion of more than 1,200 language translations within a span of only ten years.

Clearly God has been moving throughout recent history to spread his Word to all to people and languages. Technological innovation has contributed significantly to the surge in Bible translation work, and it appears the surge is intensifying now in the 21st Century.

Rearrangements: New Ways of Doing Old Things

These days, technological innovation still has much to do with rearrangements. That is, people are using new existing technology in innovative ways. Now in the digital age, constraints on the number of people who can participate in a translation program are significantly reduced. This allows for open collaboration. It increases the range of skills and abilities applied to an effort by insuring that more people are involved.

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In a book called *The Wisdom of Crowds*, James Surowiecki demonstrates through a series of stories and events in history how the collective wisdom (or collective intelligence) of a very large mix of disparate and generally uncontrolled people (the crowd) is wiser than a small group of homogenous thinkers, even if some of the group members are experts.[2]

The author's point is not that the intelligence of a few experts is irrelevant. Rather, to Surowiecki, the intelligence of a few trained people alone cannot guarantee different perspectives on a problem. "Grouping only smart people [or experts] doesn't work well because smart people…tend to resemble each other in what they do."[3] Research done by Surowiecki reveals the following:

- *Groups (the crowd) made up of smart agents (e.g. experts) and not-so-smart agents (the people at large) always did better than a group made up of only smart agents.*

- *Groups that are too much alike find it harder to keep learning.*

- *Homogeneous groups are great at doing what they do well, but they become progressively less able to investigate alternatives.*

- *If you can assemble a diverse group of people who possess varying degrees of knowledge and insight, you're better off entrusting it with major decisions rather than leaving them in the hands of one or two people, no matter how smart those people are.*

You may be wondering (or understanding) by now what all of this has to do with Bible translation. It may seem to some people that opening up the work of Bible translation to a large crowd of inventive-minded thinkers and tinkerers is a recipe for disaster, at least in terms of the handling of something as sacred and important as God's Word. Let's consider a few questions.

First, can the existing and necessary parts for doing Bible translation be rearranged in a way that could actually produce a better translation than has been previously produced in a given language? Second, could that rearrangement produce a much better first-time translation for languages that have never had a translation? Third, could it produce the translation in far less time and at a significantly lower cost than it has traditionally taken a small group to produce?

Publisher's introductions to English Bibles reassure readers that many biblical language scholars were involved in the translation. Understanding how well the end users of the translations would understand and interact with the text has been less important so expertise in that area has not been generally sought.[4] Some people would say that the latter activity is not part of a translator's task, if they assume that translation is simply meaning transfer from one language to another.

A small group of experts can exert a lot of power and translators are not above suspicion. They bring certain ideology to their work based on traditional conformity inherited from others.[5] In this sense, they impose a certain way of translating on the wider community. Therefore, crowdsourcing could be viewed by some as a challenge to the power position held by the small group of experts.

21st Century Rearrangements

To crowd-source translation work, the key is assembling large groups of people. This has not been easy or pragmatically possible in most translation situations, especially with large language groups. However, greater access to the internet now makes this doable. It may actually even make it more feasible. Cramming a large group of people in a room to generate collaborative work in a short span of time has

Crowdsourcing in translation efforts could be viewed by some as a challenge to the power position held by the small group of experts

its challenges. There may be cultural dynamics which prevent younger people from speaking when older people are present. In some cultures a woman may be reticent to express opinions or ideas in the presence of men.

As a whole, group members are limited in their ability to express their own creative thoughts simply because of the amount of time it takes to process everyone's contribution. However, recent research indicates that increased utilization of internet-based collaboration helps groups to overcome some of the limitations of large group face-to-face interaction to more fully tap their creative power.[6] Could this sort of creative power produce better Scripture translations sooner?

The notion of a large group of people successfully working together to produce a Scripture translation has much to do with who those people are. For example, according to Beth Hennessey, "The Eastern view of creativity is far less focused on products or other tangible evidence of "work" produced. Instead, creativity is seen to involve personal fulfillment…"[7] In other words, the process is just as important as the product, if not more so. Yet, launching and completing a Bible translation project requires organization, schedules and benchmarks. Therefore, the methods proposed in this article assume both task-oriented and process-oriented people working together.

Process for Including the Community

There are different ways to seek input from the community utilizing online collaboration.

1. The translation team could ask the community to simply use a voting method designed for their cultural context that allows them to grade each area in the list given earlier. This is combined with methods to elicit feedback, typically through comments. There could be multiple votes to hit on multiple facets of the translation.

2. The team could post a series of questions to guide the community in areas that need specific input.

3. They could allow the community to post comments, ask questions, point out errors and make suggestions for improvements. Recurring improvements are made by the community until the point when the project leaders determine that the translation quality has achieved optimality for

the time being. After this, the translation is ready for broad community distribution.

It is still important for collaboration to include people who are trained to do exegesis. This is still a highly critical role. If the translators have done their exegetical homework well, then they will know when the comments from the community are confirming exegetical accuracy or revealing its inaccuracy. The translators should know when contributors from the community are changing the text into something different.

This sort of broad community involvement can greatly improve every aspect of the translation. One particularly significant area that would benefit by wider community involvement is the development of key theological terms. In regard to open source collaboration, theological terms are not computer source code. But as flawed source code can degrade the entire software program, likewise weak or inaccurately communicated theological terms can greatly weaken or degrade a translation, especially in light of what that translation is meant to accomplish these days (see 4).

Confirming Translation Quality and Fidelity

When it comes to quality control, self-monitoring for accuracy (or fidelity) seems to be a natural occurrence with open collaboration. When people work together on something they highly value, they develop a greater sense of ownership. This is likely to be true with a community approach to Bible translation drafting and review, as well. If people have a high view of Scripture then they will guard the integrity of it in the process of refining it. This is a phenomenon common to many social networks and it is well-documented in the social sector.[8]

The open source and crowdsourcing concepts have major implications when it comes to who confirms the quality and accuracy of a translation. The traditional Western method still depends on a very small group of people. The group typically consists of the translator(s) and an outside translation consultant. The outside consultants do not generally know the language they are checking for fidelity and quality, therefore they depend on an oral or a written translation of the work under review produced in their own language. This means they actually analyze a translation through the filter of another language.

Some agency consultants only spot check certain books while consultants from other agencies check

every verse. Either way, all of these consultants only gain a glimpse at what is in the translation. This method is time consuming, but it does yield some reasonably good evidence in regard to fidelity. Confirming quality and community acceptance is probably a lesser outcome. While their analysis is helpful, it is hardly exhaustive. Yet, it is their approval that allows a translation to be published or not. This is hardly the precise science that Western-trained academicians have understood a consultant review to be.

Applying the notion of crowdsourcing to this area means that a wider community (the crowd), with guidance from experts, can confirm the quality and accuracy of a translation far better than a small group of 1-3 translators working with an outside translation consultant. Indeed, according to the crowdsourcing concept, the consultants are already part of the crowd and so their expertise is being applied along with all the other skills and abilities the larger community brings to the process.

Therefore, applying the traditional consultant review as the last step in a crowd-sourced translation project seems redundant by that time, if indeed consultants have participated more regularly as part of the crowd through face-to-face meetings and by means of online collaboration. This is another rearrangement of the translation parts that could change the way translations are reviewed and approved for publication. It would also remove the bottleneck that develops when a translation team waits months for an
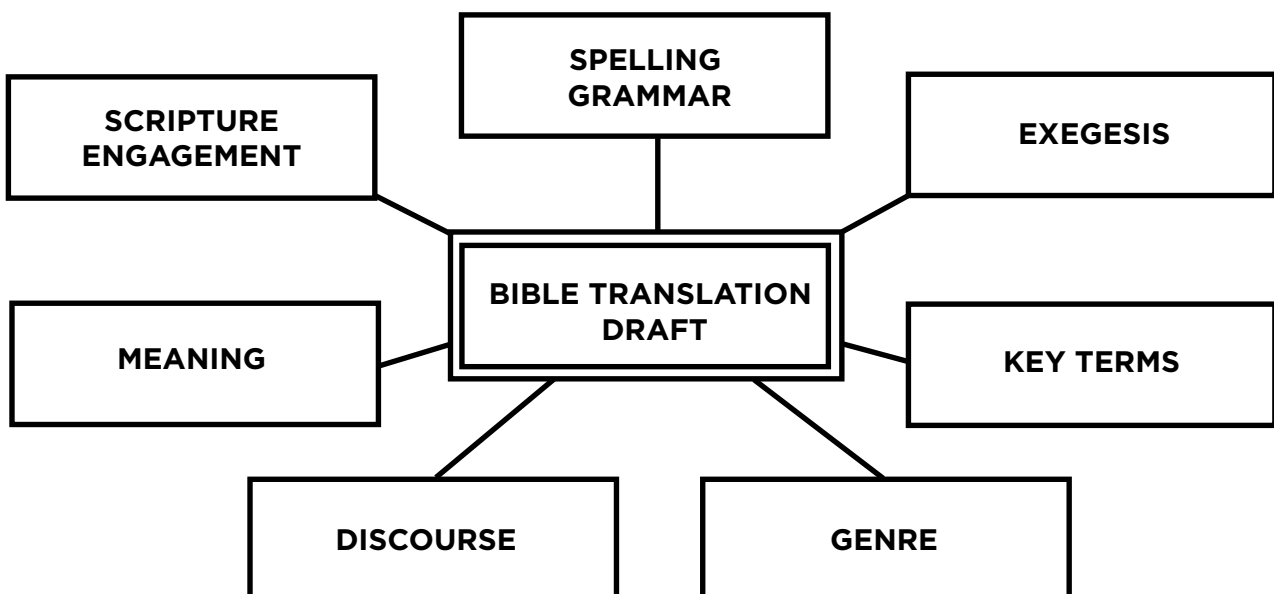
Even in large crowdsourcing groups, if people have a high view of Scripture then they will guard the integrity of it.

available consultant to give their stamp of approval on the translation.

Results: The Goda Translation

The concepts discussed in this article were tested in an isolated region of India among the Goda[9] speakers who have no translation in their language. Project planners developed a web-based crowdsourcing tool. The tool enabled anyone from the community to produce a rough draft of some Gospel of Luke chapters. Others could simply provide feedback on the drafts. People could engage in conversations around the translation work, or they could simply indicate whether they liked the work or not. The results surpassed expectations in the area of community engagement.

- 1,323 people responded by contributing their time to the translation.

- Over 100,000 votes have been cast dealing with various content topics.

- 78 users drafted verses and chapters.

- People from seven different regions where Goda

SPELLING GRAMMAR

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

EXEGESIS

BIBLE TRANSLATION DRAFT

MEANING

KEY TERMS

DISCOURSE

GENRE

people reside have participated.

- The group collaboration website, designed for the Goda project, allowed leaders and users to see the aggregated results of their work.

- Of the 558 users voting, over 100 have cast over 100 votes. Five voters were promoted to drafters after logging 800 votes.

People said they enjoyed working with their language and were growing in their understanding of that language as well as the regional language. They liked learning together and gained a better understanding of the Bible and the translation process. They also communicate joy in being able to contribute to development of their language and in making the Bible available to their people.

Even people with low to no exposure to the Web technology saw how it enables their participation and they enthusiastically utilized it. Even with unpredictable internet connections, participants were eager to work.

Eighteen to twenty nine-year olds were most responsive; however, older people and some women have also joined the groups and participated through a communal discussion process.

Conclusion

This is the difference between communities doing translation together for one another in comparison to a small closed group of people doing translation "for" the community. With the former method, the community is more likely to accept and use the translation in a greater variety of ways sooner because it is, after all, a result of their collaborative effort. With the small closed translation team approach, these effects are not usually realized on a large scale until long after the translation is completed and handed over to the community for them to use, if they ever widely use the translation at all.

The internet and smart phone technology open up the community to greater participation among non-

For crowdsourcing groups, open collaboration with anonymity often proves to be an ideal process.

literate people who in the past could not be more fully involved in a translation project because of the reading requirement. Now visual translations from the JESUS Film coupled with recordings of regional language translations by Faith Comes By Hearing can be accessed via the Web or downloaded to a smart phone. By utilizing these resources, a non-literate person gains a deeper understanding of how important theological terms, concepts, and imagery could be translated into their language.

In places where Bible translation is not particularly looked upon with delight, the community cannot work together openly on a translation project. Even so, they can work together on a secure internet collaboration site. Open collaboration with anonymity provides the best of both worlds. In fact, a significant number of the larger unreached people groups that need Bible translations fall within this category. Because of this, more of the cultural and religious insiders are taking on the daunting and sometimes dangerous task of translating "for" their people.

Given their cultural and religious contexts, they have a lot to grapple with and with very little help. Therefore, it would be a shame if people in these situations were not able to build their own crowd-sourced translation work on top of existing internet, web, and smart phone platforms for the sake of the gospel. If they did, the effect of that translation collaboration would be felt soon after it began. (MF)

[1] "Where Ideas Comes From." *WIRED*, Oct 2010, p. 122.

[2] See endnote 5.

[3] See endnote 5, chapter 2, location 619.

[4] For more on this topic see, Gilles Gravelle. "Bible Translation in Historical Context: The Changing Role of Cross-cultural Workers." *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*. 2.71. Spring 2010, 11-20.

[5] Steven Voth. "Towards an Ethic of Liberation for Bible Translation; Part 1: Ideology," SBL. Forum, n.p. [cited Feb 2008]. Online:http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=754

[6] See Paul B. Paulus, et al. 2003. *Group Creativity: Innovation Through Collaboration*, p. 7. Oxford University Press.

[7] See Beth Hennessey. 2004. "Is the Social Psychology of Creativity Really Social? Moving Beyond a Focus on the Individual." In Paul B. Paulus, et al. 2003. *Group Creativity: Innovation Through Collaboration*. Kindle Edition, chapter 9, location 2865. Oxford University Press.

[8] See Clay Shirky. 2010. Cognitive Surplus. Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age. The Penguin Press. New York.

[9] Pseudonym

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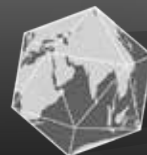
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