

Missions: Open Letter on Digital Media and the Great Commission

To mission executives, field leaders, missiologists, magazine editors, missionaries and outreach teams everywhere

“Online evangelism is strategic and crucial for this new digital century. We commend *Internet Evangelism Day*’s resources to you.” – Scott Moreau, editor *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*

We know that your ministry’s heart is to share the good news of Jesus Christ. May we draw your attention to the potential of new options that can enhance your mission’s objectives: the growing array of digital and Internet evangelism opportunities.

Far-reaching Communication Changes

Digital communication is transforming our world in ways that we are only beginning to discern. There are now over 3 billion mobile phone owners and 2 billion web users, and the majority are outside the West. Facebook has 500 million users in nearly 100 languages, making it (in terms of ‘population’) the third largest ‘country’ in the world.

The impact of the silicon chip is as dramatic and far-reaching as the invention of the printing press. This new ‘digital communication culture’ is superseding the West’s ‘print communication culture’. And remarkably, it has much more in common with the ‘oral communication cultures’ that many of us are so familiar with. Its strengths include two-way interaction and relationship building, visual storying rather than left-brain abstract analytic thinking, and the ability to offer information and help anonymously.



Digital communication has transformed the mission world too. Most mission staff are in instant digital contact with other team members, HQ, home church, and family. Mission support and recruitment is leveraged through websites. Research that only a few years back might have taken weeks, is now achieved online in seconds.

Digital Evangelism: Untapped Missions Tools

However, many cross-cultural missions have not yet really started to use digital media for their *raison d’etre* – sharing the good news. There may be various reasons for this:

- Mission web communication has usually focused primarily on publicity (reaching the support base in the West) and communication (linking up mission staff with each other and their admin bases), which offer a measurable return on investment. Technical and design staff have been appointed to fulfill these roles, rather than for a direct evangelism focus.
- Some mission staff may lack background knowledge of the underlying philosophy of digital evangelism or specific potential strategies, especially older staff whose age makes us ‘immigrants’ to digital culture, rather than born ‘citizens’. This is also reflected in the current lack of training modules about these opportunities, in bible colleges and mission training institutions.
- A belief that online evangelism is expensive and always requires a high level of technical knowledge; and that teams on the ground may lack these resources, or the time amidst existing responsibilities to attempt new initiatives of unproven worth.
- A concern that digital media may only reach the rich urban elite, rather than the majority rural or urban poor.
- A right understanding that most effective evangelism is closely tied to long-term face-to-face relationships. This may lead to the conclusion that digital media are inappropriate to share the good news, either because they communicate through supposedly far weaker and impersonal digital relationships, or perhaps due to their having been occasionally over-sold as supposedly magic-bullet

‘automated outreach’ solutions. This judgment may have been strengthened by hearing seemingly exaggerated claims of digital evangelism ‘successes’ based on unverifiable numbers of ‘decisions’.

- A belief that, though a valid means of outreach, digital evangelism is a specialism in the same category as radio or video production: best left to specialist ministries who have the requisite finance and training needed.
- A concern for mission security, and the recognized need to maintain a reasonably low profile in even relatively open countries.

Some Solutions for You to Consider

Internet Evangelism Day and the *Guide Network* partnership exist to promote awareness of the many opportunities for digital evangelism that exist, especially in cross-cultural situations outside the West. This is a focus of *Lausanne 2010*, and the *Lausanne World Pulse* email newsletter has covered the growing opportunities for digital evangelism (eg. see 6-7/2010, 2/2009):

www.lausanneworldpulse.com/archives.php

EMQ and *IJFM* also cover these issues.



We believe that the Web and digital media are God-given tools that are especially significant for relatively unreached countries and people groups for these reasons:

- Missions rightly stress the need to plant churches within easy geographical reach of target people groups, because we know that it is only through real relationships, with people they can comfortably relate to, that unreached peoples will see biblical Christianity modeled. But in a community, city or country where believers are perhaps 1% or less of population, most people may never knowingly meet a Christian, let alone build redemptive relationships with those in a Christian community. The Web can enable an initial contact.
- The Web is unique as a ‘pull medium’ that can target people based on their language, ethnicity, felt needs, life problems, or general interests. It is not limited to locating and connecting with people who are already seekers or vaguely inquisitive. It can also engage with people ‘much further back’.
- There is a remarkable online phenomenon called ‘anonymous intimacy’: people are often far more willing to share their questions, needs or problems online, than they would with even a close friend. Although it may express itself differently in various cultures, this online behavior seems universal. And in countries and religious systems where there is, at minimum, considerable social disapprobation towards someone seen to be asking even cursory questions about Christianity or reading Christian literature, the Web is a safe and private channel of inquiry. For example, there are many thousands of monthly downloads of the Bible within the Middle East. Mentoring relationships can be established online that would be difficult to initiate or maintain, face-to-face.
- The dramatic growth of mobile phone use is a major opportunity. In poorer countries, a phone may be the only digital device people will own, and they can increasingly use it to access the Web rather than visit an Internet Cafe. Mobiles are transforming trade, development, healthcare and communication throughout the global south.
- Facebook has made it easy for mobile users to read and update their Facebook pages without incurring online access charges. Mobiles also offer a unique 24/7 channel to share the good news: downloaded video clips or longer movies, as well as books and Bibles. Any Christian with a mid-to-high range phone can load a portfolio of appropriate video clips in various languages, and share them face-to-face with others as part of a conversation, indeed as a discussion starter. If the contact has a Bluetooth-equipped phone, video clips or books can also be quickly passed across to that phone too. (Cheap portable DVD players can also be used to share videos on a personal basis with two or three people.)
Read more: IEDay.net/mobile

- Video clip production is now also within the scope of the amateur. A good webcam, high-end phone, digital camera or camcorder can produce video of sufficient quality to post online or install on a mobile phone. Free or cheap editing software, allied to an understanding of the medium and creative thinking, can produce strategic video shorts.
- Facebook and other regional social networking sites are proving hugely popular in Africa, Asia and S America. For many people, these sites are their main portal for messaging and relationships, obviating the need to use the wider Internet so much. Relational Facebook evangelism and sensitive outsider-friendly Facebook fan pages have huge potential for building dialogue and sharing faith.
Read more: [IEDay/facebook](#)
- The Web can also enable any returned or retired missionary to continue ministry to their area of service. Many opportunities need no technical knowledge at all!
- There are also huge opportunities for digital discipleship and teaching, using the Web, digital books, audio/video and mobile phones.

How Can We Help?

We know that digital media are already playing a huge role in fulfilling the Great Commission and concur with George Verwer's statement:



“The Internet is one of the most key tools that God has given us in the church today. Internet Evangelism is a dynamic, effective, cutting-edge ministry that more people should get involved in!”

Internet Evangelism Day is a year-round resource guide (and annual focus day) about the many ways of using the digital media: [InternetEvangelismDay.com](#)

The *Guide Network* is an informal grouping of ministries to equip and enhance digital ministry online and by mobile phone, especially in the non-western world. Within the network are a number of informal smaller networks for digital evangelism in specific countries and regions. Their strategic significance is to draw together digital outreach teams, radio and BCC ministries, mission staff on the ground, and local church groupings, leading to vital synergy and the ability to link online inquirers with real believers at local level. Digital media are often at their most effective when integrated in this way: [IEDay.net/guide](#)

We also work closely with *Visual Story Network*, who focus on using visual digital media for evangelism: [VisualStoryNetwork.org](#)

Distance-learning modules are being planned by Biola University, to equip mission staff for digital ministry, and there are other online training resources: [IEDay.net/training](#)

We can provide speakers for mission staff conferences, team discussions or colleges, and are freely available for consultation in these areas: [IEDay.net/speaker](#)

We would be honored to assist your vital ministry in any way we can. Please contact us at office@internetevangelismday.com to discuss any aspect of digital evangelism. Please tell us also of any digital initiatives you plan or are involved in.

Yours in His Service

Tony Whittaker | Coordinator, *Internet Evangelism Day* www.internetevangelismday.com