

Multimedia: An Indian Experience

by George Koshy

No... No, Mom... I'm not going to school today!" Dan started crying as his mother helped him put on his uniform.

"O.K.," she agreed, "but if you don't go there's no more listening to the *Balalokam* music." She knew this was the only way she could persuade her six-year-old son to go to school. For a month he'd been obsessed with *Balalokam*, an audiocassette for children his father had bought for him. The cassette featured music and stories in Malayalam, an Indian language.

Dan changed his mind and got ready for school.

Tech revolution

The *Balalokam* cassette, produced by Little Me Publishing in Pathanamthitta, Kerala, India, is one example of multimedia publishing. Such publishing involves the integration of text, sound, video, multi-dimension graphics and animation. While the secular world quickly integrates various channels of multimedia into their projects, many Christian publishers have been reluctant to do so, especially those in developing countries.

Why multimedia?

Multimedia is effective for world evangelism. Statistics related to world evangelism indicate that in the last decade, 76.7 percent of the world's population has been evangelized—that is, they are adequately aware of Christianity, Christ, and the Gospel. However, many of the globe's six billion people are living in groups sealed off from Christians. To reach many of them, the best mode is the effective use of multimedia.

Christian publishers must exploit multimedia opportunities other than print. All they need is enthusiasm, creativity, the capability to visualize, and the courage to experiment.

Audio

Music is a powerful medium. It stirs the emotions of people in all walks of life. Even some of the poorest of the poor, those living in the slums, have an audio cassette player and enjoy listening to music. It can be heard at any time by one or more people. It can be a powerful evangelistic tool.

The development process for audio products—just as for print products, electronic books, web pages, or video presenta-

tions—requires attention to both the content and the target audience, and substantial planning. Singers and performers can live in far-off countries; it is not necessary to call all of them to a single place to make the master audio recording. A producer can go to their local audio studios with skeleton music, record their part at their convenience, and mix the various tracks in an editing suite. Because of the digitalization of the recording process, singing and instrumental mistakes can be corrected, and the quality can be upgraded considerably.

Producing cassettes is also a lot easier than producing books. In many countries, the costs involved in printing Christian products are such that even if realistic sales expectations are only 750 copies of a particular book, the publisher may still have to print a minimum of 1500 copies to maintain reasonable unit costs per book and therefore offer it at a price that is acceptable to the market. In the audio business, once the master cassette is ready, the headache is over. You can duplicate as many copies as needed. Even if you make 100 copies of a cassette, the unit cost will not change much. Costs of production are relatively minimal, and the return could be high. Moreover, CDs are less expensive than cassettes. They can also be sold for almost double the price of cassettes because their quality is far superior.

There is a wide variety of audio products possible. Decide what your unique selling point will be within the market. A publisher can produce spoken versions of print books, narrated in an appealing manner with appropriate background music; offer audio cassettes of sermons of eminent Christian preachers; or develop unique products that do not exist in print. For example, a U.S.-based audio company produced a collection of humorous anecdotes by Chuck Swindoll, extracted from his messages. If the appropriate rights are obtained, programs aired on radio stations—such as author interviews—can be converted into cassettes or used to enhance audio products.

Music's appeal has created many readily available audio markets. Publishers can produce the albums of a single performer or produce compilation albums featuring several artists or the best hits of a particular hymn writer or singer. Another option is to focus on a theme, producing cassettes on worship, hope, the Gospel, or the second coming of Christ.

Cassettes are particularly effective with children. Unlike books, they allow children to sing and dance with the music. Little Me produced a collection of 32 Bible verses in song format for children, converting the verses into songs so even a three-year-old can memorize them. The cassettes included a brief question-and-answer session with young children to help them to better understand the verses.

Electronic media

CD ROMs are yet another powerful tool in the multimedia industry. Study Bibles are now available with references, concordances, dictionaries, and study notes on one single CD. It is calculated that a single 640 megabyte CD can store approximately 60,000 pages. The greatest advantage of a CD is that you can carry it with you.

This technology presents a challenge to Christian publishers. One of the greatest problems you have in the audio and electronic media industry in third world countries is that of piracy. Because of the high production quality of CD's, even pirated copies are also of reasonably good quality. Since those who produce them do not have any development costs, they can afford to give a much better discount to dealers. This will affect the original publisher's sales.

Visual media

The impact of visual media is second to none. Unfortunately, Christian publishers have been very reluctant to use it. A leading publisher in India once told me, "We keep away from visual media due to two reasons. One is the cost. The other, our lack of technology know-how." Both are valid reasons, but there are means to overcome these problems."

Little Me recently organized a major evangelistic program for children. It was a three hour performance with songs, storytelling, skits, and a variety of other programs. We hired three cameramen to tape the program from various angles. After editing over nine hours of video tape, we were able to produce two 45 minute video cassettes.

To reduce the costs of visual production and increase your audience, you can do voice dubbing in other languages. This is a huge possibility in countries like India where several languages are spoken. Cinema has become a modern lifeline. It is estimated that on average, people in third world countries watch at least one movie per week. The success of the *Jesus* film and *The Passion of the Christ* has proved that film is one of the biggest markets available to Christians.

Other media

From Mickey Mouse's endearing antics to Lara Croft's edge-of-the-seat adventures, generations have grown up admiring the magic of animation, where each frame of a film or movie is produced individually. Frames can be generated as a computer graphic, by photographing a drawn image, or by repeatedly making small changes to a model and photograph-

ing the result. When the frames are strung together and the resulting film is viewed at a speed of 16 or more frames per second, there is an illusion of continuous movement. The development process for animation is labor-intensive and expensive. Computer software programs, like Flash and 3D Max, have greatly sped up the process. Voice dubbing is also very easy in animation programs.

Interactive multimedia applications—video or computer games—allow users to actively participate instead of remaining passive recipients of information. For instance, a user can play a simulated multimedia soccer match without actually going outside. The video game simulation environment is created by using control equipment (headsets, goggles, joysticks, and sensors) and by coordinating the various multimedia components. This same virtual reality effect can be adapted to play games of *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Holy War*.

Heavenly technology

Our planet is fast becoming a web of crisscrossing influences. Travel and technology have brought about a mingling of peoples and cultures on a scale that we could have never imagined. The application of multimedia communication has tremendously increased this interaction. Christian publishers must effectively use every channel at their disposal to spread the Gospel, from print to audio to video and more.

Steve, a man traveling for business, sent an e-mail to his wife from his hotel. Unfortunately, he made a small mistake in the email address.

The recipient, a woman named Stella, had just arrived home after the funeral of her husband. She opened her e-mail inbox to read the condolence messages of her friends who could not attend the funeral ceremony. After reading Steve's message, she fainted. Her son rushed to her to see what was wrong. This was the message he saw on the computer screen:

Honey:

Reached here safely. Journey was little tough, but the stay is very comfortable. We have Internet access and e-mail facilities in each room. I am missing you very much, so I made arrangements for you to come over here tomorrow. I'll wait for you. Wish you a happy journey.

Yours, Darling Hubby

An e-mail from heaven to earth? Sounds a bit crazy. It may be unheard of, but Christian publishers can take advantage of new developments in communication technology to bring heaven to earth. We have the power to direct millions of people to Jesus if we creatively and prayerfully use multimedia. It is time that Christian publishers rise to the challenge of this vast opportunity. It is time to act, not to shy away. ▽

George Koshy (gmaindia@yahoo.co.in), founder of Little Me Publishing in Pathanamthitta, Kerala, India, has extensive experience in journalism and multimedia production. He specializes in writing and publishing for children.