The impact of new media is transforming the nomadic people I have worked among. Ageless traditions are shifting with the introduction of new technologies. I realized recently that these nomads were no longer making decisions about where to set up camp on the basis of where they could find water. Rather, campsites were determined by where they could get mobile phone coverage.

It took meeting Abu Mohammed at my neighbor’s funeral to realize just how far things had developed. As it turned out, he was a man who fulfilled all the noble ideals of his people—living in the remote desert in a black goat hair tent, having a reputation for hospitality and generosity, and excelling as a big-game tracker and hunter. After the commemorative dinner in the mourning tent, Abu Mohammed took the role of emcee for the evening, regaling us with tales of his hunting exploits and the skills he had used to track down and kill his prey. I was amazed when he produced a mobile phone from his pocket and pulled up a video showing him brandishing his scoped hunting rifle as he posed next to various animals he had bagged. Wow! Not only had this forty-some-thing “man’s man” embodying the ideals of his people—taken his video clips and assembled them into an impressive show on his phone, but he had even added a popular local tune in the background. Yes, I had known that the mobile phone was making tremendous inroads among these people, but this meshing of all that was truly and agelessly representative of their culture with the latest and greatest of the 21st century took my breath away!

Keeping Up With the Mobile Revolution

What a strange world we live in, a world where we highly literate, technologically savvy expatriates who live and work with “backwards” illiterate tribal peoples find ourselves lagging years behind those same people in our use of portable communications and media technology. My western co-worker, for instance, still purchases his mobile phone on the basis of whether or not it has a built-in flashlight with little concern for the fact that the phone has no camera,
The people of India now have better access to mobile phones than to toilets.

A Revolution in Capability
The phenomenal uptake of the mobile phone in the last decade has been propelled by the fact that the mobile phone has become so much more than just a phone. The mobile phone today has thousands of times more computing power than the systems that guided the Apollo space program to the moon 40 years ago (Quadir 2009)! For your average citizen of the developing world, the mobile phone wraps up the capabilities of a computer, TV, music player, camera, video recorder and game system into one affordable and easy-to-carry package.

The powerful new capabilities delivered by “smart phones” with apps (applications) were demonstrated to me last summer while visiting my family in the United States. One relative used her mobile phone to scan the barcode on the back of a book and an app on her phone instantly brought up the cheapest prices for it on the internet as well as the cheapest price it was being sold for in the local area (her phone contained a Global Positioning System (GPS) chip). Another relative showed me how he could put his iPhone up to the radio and instantly have it display the name of the song being played, the name of the singer/band, and a picture of the album cover. These kinds of capabilities were not dreamed of just a few years ago, but they will be the next generation’s “bread and butter” that they can not imagine living without.

A Revolution in Realms of Application
The versatility of the mobile phone is quickly extending its use into new realms of application. They are currently being used for money transfer and banking, as e-book readers and movie players, and in their more familiar uses as video and still cameras and music players. Mobile phones offer exciting new possibilities in the fields of health, education and development, with innovative new uses being implemented in these fields almost daily. In Malawi, Community Health Workers (CHWs) scattered throughout an entire governate are notified of new cases and assisted in patient diagnosis and treatment through the FrontlineSMS (www.frontlinesms.com) hub at the regional hospital (Banks and Nesbit 2008). Researchers at UCLA have found a way to turn mobile phones into portable water quality and blood testing devices that allow for water quality monitoring and patient diagnoses in the field far from laboratories (Eisenberg 2009). Students in India are now learning English through mobile phone games (Kam et al. 2009) while teachers in Kenya take part in in-service training via an SMS (Short Message Service) texting service (Traxler 2007). Fishermen in the Kerala district of India now use their phones to compare market prices and then sail to the port where they can get the best price for their catch (Jensen 2007). Disaster relief following the recent earthquake in Haiti was coordinated through a mobile-based SMS system known as Ushahidi (www.ushahidi.com) and more than 40 million dollars in donations was raised within weeks via a “text-to-give” campaign (Financial Times 2010).

Social and political activism has also been radically affected. Just as the Iranian Revolution of the 1970s was ushered in by the strategic use of the “new media” of cassette tapes carrying the teaching of Ayatollah Khomeini, so too, at the beginning of the 21st century, the protest movement in Iran is being fueled and carried forward by the “new media” of mobile phone originated videos, Twitter posts, and crowdsourcing announcements. Yes, the spread of mobile phone technology in the last decade has been truly “revolutionary.” Its effects on many varied aspects of human life will continue to grow in extraordinary ways.

A Revolution on the Internet
The Internet giant Google has made itself the preeminent internet company worldwide by keeping a pulse of where the web is going and what its users want and then being the first one there with the services needed. In February Eric Schmidt, Google’s CEO, announced that Google, from hence forward, would be a “mobile first” company—all its new products and services will be designed first for the mobile phone and second for the...
Within weeks we realized that, if we wanted to get the audio Bible stories out among these people, we would have to provide a media player for them. We ended up purchasing MegaVoice solar-powered audio players which seemed perfect for the task. However, at $35 a unit, we were hesitant to distribute them unless we knew there was solid interest.

What we had failed to notice was that these nomads already had media players—their mobile phones! They were using them to listen to music and poetry as well as view videos. This realization changed our strategy, so we now start out by sharing individual Scripture stories on our phone during a visit, and then transfer it by Bluetooth to those who are interested. If a person shows enough interest or has come to faith, we can then provide a mobile phone memory card (quite inexpensive and entirely natural for a nomad to have) containing the entire panoramic set of Bible stories.

A Ready Explanation for the Hope Within

How many of you always go out your door with a tract in hand? A Bible? A computer or portable DVD player with scripture video? The chances are good that most of us are much more likely to leave the house with a mobile phone in our pocket than any of the other items mentioned! How convenient would it be if the mobile phone you carried had a veritable toolbox of songs, poetry and/or videos that point to Christ and which you could share with people you came into contact with throughout the day? When I walk out the door these days I’m blessed to have short selections of the audio panoramic Bible in the language of my people, as well as 40+ videos of Bible stories from creation to the crucifixion. In addition, I have numerous spiritual poems and musical Psalms ready and waiting in my pocket should the right opportunity arise. The great thing is that viewing and sharing photos, music, and videos on mobile phone is now so common among the people group I live among that whipping out my phone and sharing one of these video or audio files with them is completely natural!

The Power of Video

A friend of mine told me the other day about how she tried to teach her daughter a math lesson, and how she was met with a blank, uncomprehending and disinterested stare. Many of us working cross-culturally in oral-based cultures know that stare. My friend later found a fairly simple and not-too-engaging video on YouTube teaching the same math lesson. Her daughter proceeded to watch it with rapt attention and quickly caught the concept. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a video makes mere spoken words nearly obsolete!

Many of us working among oral-based cultures have learned the importance of orality and chronological Bible storytelling. We put our utmost effort into learning how to story the Bible only to be interrupted halfway through our presentation with that blank uncomprehending stare. It probably doesn’t help that a lot of us aren’t the best storytellers in our native language let alone in the language of our host culture! This has often been our experience working amongst the people group we have been called to! Praise the Lord that materials are now available that enable us to bridge the gap.

It might be helpful to consider the impact of mobile media materials that use a storytelling approach. Sabeel Media (www.sabeelmedia.com) recently introduced a series of twelve short (2-5 minute) mobile phone video clips dramatizing episodes from different Old Testament prophets’ lives, and the response among our friends has been fantastic. We have used these along with other short clips we have selected from Campus Crusade’s Jesus and Magdalena films on our mobile phones, and we’ve...
been thrilled to see new interest and comprehension in people we thought completely closed and immune to the gospel. There’s the case of Kalya, a woman who had, in the past, reacted angrily whenever one of us would share a message from the Bible with her. She would respond by turning the tables on us and preaching about her religion. However, Kalya was so taken with seeing and hearing the story of Solomon and the two mothers in her own language that she immediately asked to have the video sent to her so she could watch it again and show it to her friends and family.

**Viral Replication**

Missions strategists tell us that our outreach should be reproducible by those we are seeking to reach. The ubiquity of the mobile phone’s presence and Bluetooth phone-to-phone connectivity make mobile media ministry eminently reproducible. We simply send Bluetooth videos on to those interested in them and they can then replay them and show them to others. Those other people, in turn, can show them to their friends who in turn can send them on to their wider circle of friends. Rather than solely reaching our limited circle of acquaintances and friends, mobile phone media has the potential to reach thousands and even tens of thousands.

The local-language media we have been using is now being shared in several countries throughout our region. It has been particularly exciting to see the intense demand it has generated in Chad, where it found a “sweet spot” for production. It has been particularly exciting to see the intense demand it has generated among a population that has a sufficiently high ownership of mobile phones. While population that has a sufficiently high ownership of mobile phones is now being shared in several countries throughout our region.

We simply send Bluetooth videos on to those interested in them.

In general, materials that spread virally will focus on the essentials of the Biblical message, in a descriptive or even documentary manner. They should not make use of negative assaults on the beliefs of the audience or make inappropriate demands of them. Generally, successful materials use a story-telling approach and this leads users to feel comfortable in sharing these materials with others. In some cases small adjustments can make a huge difference in usability. In one country, viewers were extremely uncomfortable with the “evangelistic ending” on a film version of the life of Jesus. They would turn off the television at this point, and a national broadcaster cut off the offensive ending, even though they were happy to show the film itself. When the ending was reworked to be less preachy and more descriptive of what a person should do if he or she would like to follow Christ, it was found to be more acceptable to viewers.

Furthermore, materials should appeal to local tastes and aesthetics. It is important that our materials convey that the Bible narrative is a message for all peoples, a universal heritage. But foreign music and alien literary and visual forms communicate that the message does not belong to this particular audience. Local music, storytelling, and poetic forms make the material familiar, easy to share with family and friends, and potentially viral in replication.

When producing new materials, it is important to include people from the intended audience group on the project team as soon as possible, and in as many different aspects as possible: scriptwriting, translation, editing, testing, recording, and distribution. Involving the audience in this way leads to the materials being user-friendly and shareable. Furthermore, the wider the involvement of people from the community, the greater the sense of “ownership” on their part. This holds true even for those who are not yet followers of Christ.

We will undoubtedly need to experiment with many different products and approaches, “letting a thousand flowers bloom,” to find the ones that are most appealing and viral. The best approaches will not necessarily demand large infrastructures, or have to be complicated and expensive. In fact, some of the most successful technology products in recent years have been deliberately simple and user-friendly (Capps 2009). This is likely to be true of content as well.

**Pointers for Mobile Outreach**

Since the mobile phone is increasingly being used as the primary video screen by people in the developing world, whether it be for viewing home videos, music videos, or even Hollywood movies, it provides a new means for the unreached to interact with media both on-demand and with privacy. Media outreaches can and
We must realize that the unreached are more likely to find Christ while surfing the web on a mobile phone than on a PC.

We can modify materials in ways that will help users to form their own small communities of faith with others whom they already know and trust (an approach known as a transformational model). Some radio ministries, such as the "Church in My Home" broadcasts, have already seen very successful results from promoting the formation of local faith communities with programs that model community life and gatherings.

Transformational church planting follows the same logic as viral media distribution, and ultimately plays on the same dynamics. People live within extended webs of relationships, or social networks. They spend the bulk of their time relating to and communicating with people in their networks, and these are the people they trust the most and learn from the most. Successful viral media distribution spreads through such networks of relationship, and reproducing communities of faith spread through the same networks in much the same way.

After decades of empirical research on successful religious movements across many different religious groups of the world, sociologist Rodney Stark concludes that "conversion tends to proceed along social networks formed by interpersonal attachments" (Stark 1996: 16).
We should also be wary of being dazzled by the “whiz-bang” of such new technologies. I have deep concerns about missions, seeing the explosive growth of the iPhone in the U.S. and European markets, spending untold hours and money developing apps for it when it is almost guaranteed, due to price and distribution issues, that it will never be used by more than the smallest fraction of the unreached. We have also seen end-users more dazzled by the medium than taken with the message we are trying to share. Some of our friends have been more interested in the sleek new touch screen phone we’re using than the materials we’re showing. Concerns have also been noted as to the security issues of having outreach materials on one’s mobile phone and the personal safety issues of using high end phones in low-income/high crime areas. No, this is not a silver bullet for every ill in reaching the world for Christ! Yet we are excited about the potential of this technology.

**Conclusion**

Whether you live and work in the largest city in Asia or in the darkest jungle in Africa, your lives and the lives of those you work with are being transformed by the intersection of mobile phones, audio/video technology, and the internet. As those who proclaim the message of Christ, I believe it is incumbent upon us to take advantage of this new opportunity, especially as we see our intended audience being swept up by the mobile revolution. Mobile phones are the most widely used media technology among the unreached today. Mobile phones will become the main device accessing the internet within the next five years. Mobile phones will be increasingly important worldwide in the next two decades as more and more services (direct payment, banking, navigation, instantaneous voice and print translation, augmented reality, etc.) are added to its already expansive list of capabilities. Are we investigating the amazing new abilities that mobile phone technology brings to the table? Do we recognize that the mobile is the next generation of mass media subsequent to TV and internet, and that its abilities surpass those of the previous generations? Are we finding ways to use these new capabilities to spread the glory of God among the unreached? I challenge you to think strategically while acting quickly to harness the potential mobile phone outreach offers in bringing the gospel of Christ to the lost.

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1 A “panoramic Bible” is a series of selected narratives about characters from the Bible (also known as “biographical portions”). These portions are chosen to present themes of the biblical message in a balanced way, presenting the “whole counsel of God.” For example, the Bible Society in one country has been successful in selling a series of booklets on the prophets. Each booklet consists of translated biblical passages that together present the story of an Old Testament prophet or biblical character. Readers learn to appreciate the Bible, and many eventually seek to learn more.  

2 According to International Telecommunications Union 2009, this area had 16% mobile penetration in 2008.

3 See more discussion of these models in Gray and Gray, IJFM 26:2 (Summer 2009), p. 63; and Gray et al, in IJFM 27:2 (April-June 2010), p. 89.
And if you plan on making media with your phone, an external microphone is crucial. So, which microphone is right for you? Learn more about some of our recommendations here: https://mobileministryforum.org/your-media. Proverbs 31 in Afar - Mobile Ministry Forum. This article is the result of a story that was shared with Keith Williams during EMDC 2019. Five years ago, when I attended EMDC for the first time, I grew. Web-Empowered Ministry and millions of other books are available for Amazon Kindle. Learn more. Enter your mobile number or email address below and we’ll send you a link to download the free Kindle App. Then you can start reading Kindle books on your smartphone, tablet, or computer - no Kindle device required. Apple. Android. Windows Phone. Android. My guess is that there are ministry leaders who want to have a more active web presence, but don’t have the energy or the time to build that presence on their own. And I’d bet that some of those same people would equip someone else to do it as part of their ministry if they only knew how. This book is a start. This book is technical, but it is practical. I could see someone handing this book off as a primer for a key volunteer.