

Multilingual August 2016, Community Lives  
TED Community  
By Jeannette Stewart

If Wikipedia is collecting the world's knowledge and Mozilla is defending a free and open internet, TED is giving voice to "Ideas Worth Spreading." What started over 30 years ago as a one-off conference bringing together the already-converging elements of technology, education and design, has mushroomed into a world-wide phenomenon that attracts some of the top thinkers, luminaries and influencers across the entire spectrum of human endeavors. TED has come a long way from its original concept but its mission has remained the same: make great ideas accessible and spark conversation.

TED is a global community providing a multilayered platform for sharing ideas in the form of conferences, local events, educational material, books, prize projects and so much more. Within the large TED Community, there are some specialized groups, like TED speakers, TED Fellows, TED Organizers and lastly but probably most importantly TED Translators who manage to spread the ideas across the language barriers.

Like most grass-root movements, the Open Translation Project (OTP) was created by popular demand in response to continuous volunteer requests to translate the popular TED Talks. When TED Talks started sharing the talks online in 2006, both professional translators and bilingual people around the globe were approaching TED daily and volunteering to translate the talks into their own language so they could share with their family and friends. TED realized that enabling the TED Talks inspiring ideas to cross languages and borders was in line with their mission of giving voice to even more inspiring individuals by becoming truly global.

In 2008, TED brought in Kristin Windbigler, a journalist with a background in web development, was the obvious and best choice to create a new system for TED to allow translators to participate. She started her career in Wired and participated in various community initiatives. In 2009, the Open Translation Project was launched with 300 translations in 40 languages created by 200 volunteer translators. Today there are 93,000 translations in 112 languages and a vibrant committed community of 25,000 volunteer translators. To date, volunteer translators have translated over a million minutes of subtitles of TED Talks. The Open Translation Project, soon to be called TED Translators, has expanded to include transcription, translation and subtitling of TEDx Talks, translation of TED-Ed lessons (translators' favorite!), localization of TED's Android app, all expanding the reach of inspiring ideas globally.

Windbigler, now a Director of the OTP insists that she cannot be fully credited with the success of the OTP as the true heroes are the thousands of committed volunteer translators. The translators volunteer because they want to positively affect other people's lives and by sharing the inspiring information in their own language, their participation is meaningful. A lot of volunteer translators are young and benefit by adding "TED volunteer translator" in their resumes. Windbigler has been asked by many volunteer translators to write a reference letter for them, both addressed to prospective employers but also for postgraduate studies. This has made her realize the importance of mentoring practices in volunteer communities. Helping the young translators develop their personal and professional skills is paramount in enabling them to share those skills then with new volunteers.

Following on from Windbigler's insistence in crediting TED's army of volunteers, I reached out to the rest of the team to broaden my perspective on what makes the OTP so successful.

Surprisingly for the amount of work that goes through OTP, the team is fairly small, only six people, all scattered around the globe in completely different time-zones and cultures. They have all been previously committed OTP volunteers and despite their busy schedules, they still manage to contribute regularly.

Dimitra Papageorgiou runs the Language Coordinator program helping the experienced reviewers become mentors. Born in Athens, now based in Thessaloniki, Papageorgiou is also the Coordinator of the Greek language group. The OTP has multiple Language Coordinators in 72 languages and they are tasked to develop their language communities, maintain style-guides, answer linguistic queries and be overall responsible for the final quality. She explained that it is the task of TED's Language Coordinators to provide guidance to those volunteers working in their respective language group. Coordinators act as mentors, ensuring that volunteers become familiar with guidelines for their particular group. The experience and well-honed skills of Coordinators ensure that when translation problems or community issues arise, there is an authoritative voice to resolve them. Taking her role to a higher organizational level, Papageorgiou sees herself as the Coordinator of Coordinators. She speaks passionately of her work, finding immense satisfaction in working with many gifted individuals of enormously varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As she puts it herself, "Volunteer TED Translators are idea enhancers. They make ideas available to larger audiences than the ones they could reach in just the speaker's language. Without them, spreading TED ideas would not be as powerful." Her success is impressive and her enthusiasm is admirable as she also continues her work as a volunteer translator and transcriber for TED.

TED's well-organized community of volunteers are enabled to work together in their tasks thanks to a carefully-crafted set of guidelines and training material. Responsibility for the creation and supervision of these materials lies with Krystian Arpata, an impressively-credentialed Polish translator. A native of Lublin, his native tongue is the Silesian dialect. Now fully employed by TED, Arpata relishes his work. As he explains, "I enjoy working for an organization whose mission completely agrees with my values. I also enjoy being able to help volunteers and empower them

to become emancipated translators and mentors in their community." Arpata formerly worked as a teacher, a role that is well-suited to provide clear instructions and training materials for the community. He first became involved with TED as a volunteer translator and still contributes in this capacity in both Polish and English. He was drawn to TED after his chance discovery of a TED talk by Jill Bolte Taylor. Impressed by the structure of the talk's content and Bolte Taylor's delivery, he explored TED further and began to appreciate the format's strengths in delivering fresh ideas to a vast, diverse audience and to do so for free. Now he's helping a growing host of translators to deliver high-quality, consistent subtitled talks to the global community.

Due to time-zone and scheduling issues I didn't manage to interview the rest of the team, but their responsibilities need to be mentioned as they are paramount to the finely tuned operation of OTP. Helene Batt, the Translation Distribution Manager, assists the TED Distribution Team with ensuring that subtitled talks are available on partners' platforms around the world. This increases non-English speakers' access to the ideas of TED speakers. Ivana Korom works as

the liaison between TED translators and the TEDx program. She and Helene both help TED's curation and editorial teams in the hunt to find the best talks happening in other languages around the world. Jenny Zurawell works with the TED engineering team and the Amara development team to build and improve the subtitling platform.

TED is the success it is because of the high-quality of its people. But what enables those people to do their jobs so effectively? Aside from the administrative side of the community, subtitling is the main activity that volunteers work on. The tool that TED uses for this task is Amara.

Amara is home to the leading web-based subtitling platform on the open source market. It is also home to its own vast multilingual community and even has its own independent sub-reddit. TED is just one of many affiliates using its resources. Amara is focused on the practical benefits of subtitling, which is, as many translators know, a sophisticated set of practices in itself. For example, closed captioning may be required for users with disabilities as well translation for those unacquainted with the source language of a video. In addition, translations might have to incorporate localized data such as different systems of weights and measures. There are also aesthetic guidelines as mentioned above that contribute to the look and feel of a video, with, for example, lines breaks that should conform to both the meaning of the dialog as well as having an appealing on-screen appearance.

There is a specific approach to subtitling that Amara takes. First users load a source video and transcribe it with the platform's transcription interface. This uses small segments of video that allow transcribers to record manageable parts of the whole. Once this stage is completed, users have a raw written version of the video's spoken words. Timing, translation and formatting follow. Timing essentially is a process of matching the appearance of subtitles with what is being said on screen. When done well this, of course, is not of much concern to viewers, but when out of phase, the

effect can be jarring, maybe even misleading. Translation follows and this is pretty much the same as using a CAT tool. Formatting is a matter of experience, skill and following guidelines. Taken together, these elements constitute a powerful means of localizing content. Doubts have been raised about 'crowd-sourcing' localization in this way, because it can be difficult to ensure consistency, although TED is proof that such concerns are not as serious as may be suggested. However, as the Amara people suggest themselves, the best way of learning about the platform, its features and its capabilities is to try it out first hand.

Amara was co-founded by Dean Jansen, current Executive Director of Amara.org and is part of the Participatory Culture Foundation (PCF). PCF was founded in 2005 with a mission to enable and support independent, non-corporate creativity and political engagement. With numerous grants they have now evolved into "supporting a democratic media by creating open and decentralized video tools and services". Amara is their main project and its partial monetization enables them to build further features and improve the functionality.

Amara and TED seem to be a perfect fit for each other. Amara is establishing itself as the de facto standard for subtitling on the web and TED is using this to communicate its ideas effectively and taking them to communities that otherwise would miss out. Furthermore, multilingual content enables TED to expand its services and further fulfill its mission.

For example, the TEDx Program is designed to help communities, organizations and individuals to spark conversation and connection through local TED-like experiences. At TEDx events, a

screening of TED Talks videos — or a combination of live presenters and TED Talks videos — sparks deep conversation and connections at the local level. TEDx events are planned and coordinated independently, under a free license granted by TED

There are over 2,200 TED Talks in English and its very interesting to see how the community of volunteer translators is spearheading the reach of the inspiring Talks into other languages and cultures. There are at least 11 languages with over 2,000 translated talks showing a nearly complete content localization performed by the power of the community.

TED has set its sights on changing the world and believes that the power of ideas will transform attitudes and peoples' lives. Its marshaling of an army of volunteers, a credit-worthy cast of speakers with important things to say and its harnessing of slick, effective technology shared on the web make it a huge success story for the internet age. TED has surpassed its original one-off conception and set the global standard in presentations. Everyone in the multilingual community should be proud of the achievements of OTP. It has blazed a trail that we hope many more will follow.