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Presentations from the elite Pop!Tech conference will be available online subtitled in eight languages. All thanks to dotSub, a service offering Wiki-style translations

by [Ernest Beck](#)



New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman spoke at last year's Pop!Tech conference. The video is now available online—with captions in eight languages.

For all those Swahili speakers who were left off the guest list for next week's [Pop!Tech](#) conference, an elite annual gathering of "visionary thinkers," help is at hand.

In an effort to make conference content more accessible to a wider audience, Pop!Tech is teaming with dotSUB.com, a new site with Web video subtitling capabilities, to offer podcasts of selected events in eight languages—including Chinese, Arabic, and Swahili. While live Web streaming of the talks is on offer again this year, the goal of offering subtitled versions, says Pop!Tech curator Andrew Zolli, is "to communicate with a larger constituency and to eliminate barriers to participation, including language." In a preview, Pop!Tech is posting podcasts from previous years' gatherings, including one featuring *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman chatting about the "greening" of China.

Spreading the word is important because only around 600 people, including scientists, futurologists, designers, and other major thinkers get to attend the yearly conference in the small town of Camden, Me., focusing on the social impact of technology. And the talkfest—like many similar meetings—is expensive, at \$3,495 per person for the three-day event. The podcasts will be free.

Even if Pop!Tech podcasts are posted on the Web, non-English speakers would be out of luck. And that's a lot of people: Two-thirds of global Internet users are non-English speakers, according to Internet World Stats.

Virtual Melting Pot

While English-speakers account for 31.2% of global Internet users—double the number of Chinese users (15.7%)—Chinese-speakers are fast catching up. Their number grew by 496% between 2000 and 2007, compared with 157% for English. "There are a lot of new people to talk to," Zolli says, adding, "but how do we talk to them?"

That wasn't supposed to be a question in the Internet Age. After all, the Web was heralded as a potentially vast melting pot, one that would bring together remote users in a common cause of spreading information to everyone, everywhere. But for all its power to reach and unite far-flung users, the Web is, for the most part, fragmented into separate language camps. While there's a huge hunger for content, and a growing number of community-based sites, much of that content doesn't cross language borders.

One stumbling block is that traditional translating methods can be expensive and time-consuming. And placing subtitles on videos is a complex process. Enter Michael Smolens, chief executive of New York's dotSUB. As a businessman with more than 30 years of experience in manufacturing within developing countries—including investments in clothing factories in Hungary and Romania—Smolens says he became aware of the linguistic disconnect around the world and the "tremendous un-met need" for a technology to enable better communications among cultures.

Tamper-Proof Captions

He also saw a chance to start a business by bridging the language divide. So last year he launched the beta version of dotSUB. The premise is simple: think YouTube meets Wikipedia. Essentially, users can upload videos, films—even TV programs—for either the rest of the world or dotSUB's team to translate.

The site offers various ways for users or translators to get involved. The "closed" format that Pop!Tech has adopted utilizes dotSUB's team of freelancers. The fee, Smolens says, is less than the average cost of subtitling a video, because the site's proprietary software does away with the need for a studio or engineers. Once the video has been translated the captions can be "locked" and therefore made tamper-proof once posted.

The "open" method means posting your video on dotSUB.com and letting volunteers, friends, or fans—anyone in the Web community—translate it for free, Wiki-style—into any language, using dotSUB's software tools. This is the right idea, says [Don Tapscott](#) (BusinessWeek, 2/1/07), author of the recent book, *Wikinomics*. "The Web is shifting from being a platform for social networking to social production. It's natural that one of the spaces for self-organization and co-innovation will be in translation."

Far-Reaching Benefits

So far, a wide range of users is testing the site's capabilities. They include nonprofits, such as **Hands to Hearts International**, which works with orphanages in India and to

date has used the software to add translations in some 15 languages. Another client is ArcelorMittal ([MT](#)), the world's largest steel company, which translated a corporate video into the 14 languages in which the company does business.

Currently on dotSUB's most popular list is a film from the Ashoka Foundation about Nobel Prize-winner Muhammad Yunus, who pioneered micro-credit loans to the poor. To date, that clip has been translated into at least 76 languages, many that most people probably haven't heard of (Mirpuri, Bambara, and Twi, for example). It proves, Smolens says, "people can benefit from the creations of other people." According to Smolens, the site got 3.4 million hits in September.

Of course, Smolens goal isn't only to facilitate cultural understanding. He also intends to make money, via translating and licensing fees and revenue sharing from media companies that want to create content in multiple languages. His ultimate goal is no less lofty than to make dotSUB "as ubiquitous as Google," he says, as the place to go for creating and disseminating multiple language videos.

Potential for "Nefarious Mistranslations"

For Pop!Tech's Zolli, dotSUB is a simple and relatively inexpensive way to share what his illustrious conference panels are talking about in Maine with those who are far away or who don't speak English. At this year's conference, which runs from Oct. 17 to 20, the theme is "The Human Impact," and the eclectic lineup of speakers ranges from the Grand Mufti of Bosnia to digital toy designer Caleb Chung. The eight Podcast languages were chosen for maximum impact, Zolli explains: French and Spanish for their "post-colonial implications;" Swahili to reach a sizable portion of those who live in sub-Saharan Africa.

Initially Pop!Tech will use the closed system on dotSUB, but might eventually shift to a mix of closed and open—a step that could lead to Wiki-esque inaccuracies. While Zolli acknowledges the potential of having "nefarious mistranslations and scandalous, upsetting things" attributed to conference speakers, he believes it's more important to spread ideas. "The potential benefits of reaching 300 million Chinese school kids, with a message about where the world is going," he says, "are worth the risk."

Ernest Beck spent almost a decade as a staff reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* in Budapest and London. After leaving the Journal in 2002, he became a freelance contributor to numerous publications including the *New York Times*, *Metropolitan Home*, and *SmallBiz*. He is the editor of the book *Brancusi's Endless Column* about a mysterious sculpture in Romania (Scala, 2007).