Crash Course Translation Crowdsourcing Proposal
Alan Massey, Ben Curl, Lindsay Smith, Mason Leary

Executive Summary

Crash Course is a YouTube channel that provides short lessons on various topics. It consists of series of 10-15 minute animated videos which cover 16 different topics ranging from video games to philosophy to anatomy and physiology. There is also a children’s channel, with videos of 2-5 minutes in length. The channel launched in 2011 and partnered with PBS Studios in 2015, allowing it to expand the number of hosts and topics available. Crash Course currently has over four million subscribers and over 550 videos.

We propose a crowdsourced translation project to make Crash Course’s videos accessible to a global audience by using volunteers to subtitle the videos in various languages. There is obvious interest by the viewership in having these videos in other languages, given that some videos already have fan-provided subtitles in a few languages such as Croatian and Hindi. We would like to start a pilot program to test how well volunteer translation works for this channel. The pilot will focus on subtitling the most popular videos in just a couple of languages, which will be selected with the help of the channel’s viewer statistics. As a non-profit channel, it is dependent on donations, supplemented by PBS funding. Therefore our project would also include getting the Patreon donation page into viewers’ native languages.

We will leverage the existing viewership for translation by using the channel itself, as well as Crash Course’s social media. The volunteers will subtitle using Amara, a very user-friendly subtitling platform that allows users themselves to translate, sync, review and then upload the subtitles straight to YouTube. To reward translators for their work, they will be acknowledged in the video credits.

To ensure that the subtitles are reasonably intelligible and accurate, we will screen volunteers for basic language and translation ability through testing. In order to maintain consistency across videos and languages, we will provide the volunteers with a style guide, indicating general guidelines such as the use of simple, non-technical language and a friendly, informal tone, for example. To help ensure quality and keep mischief to a minimum, each video’s subtitles will be reviewed by another translator before going live; additionally, translators can review and suggest edits for subtitles already published. This crowdsourcing pilot should give a good idea of whether to expand the subtitling project and if successful, will make Crash Course’s knowledge available to people eager to learn, regardless of their language.
Quantity of Translatable Material and Available Translators

The ability for us to reach a high capacity for translation hinges solely on our users. Fortunately, our art medium allows us to reach large numbers of potential translators. A YouTube channel with numerous sub-channels, Crash Course’s current number of subscribers at the time of this proposal is 4,347,307, and some of these subscribers have already started translation into a few languages on various videos.

Crash Course currently has 555 videos uploaded, each averaging fifteen minutes with heavy dialog. At roughly 2,400 words per video, 1,332,000 words would need to be translated into many different languages. This is especially staggering when considering that the channel continues to grow by at least two videos a week. For this reason, we will be looking at a pilot translation program in fewer languages which would focus on the most popular videos. Popularity would be determined by views. Additionally, translation of the Patreon donation page will be one of the initiatives in this pilot.

To recruit potential translators, we would begin by advertising in Crash Course videos directly. Either at the end or the beginning of the video, there would be a statement asking for translators in the languages targeted by the pilot program. An annotation would then be added, linking to an informational page on the program. This link will also be provided in the description below the video.

Crash Course is also tied to social media. With a Tumblr, Twitter and Facebook page we will also advertise and recruit through social media posts. We know that majority of the subscribers/friends/followers are from the United States, but the amount of fan translations that have already been put up on the YouTube videos without any advertisement to or positive reinforcement for translators seems to suggest that the number of users in foreign countries and/or bilingual users is high. Finally, we will use banner ads through our channel partners, PBS and Patreon, to advertise to an even broader audience.

We have chosen Amara as our subtitling platform because of its ease of use to new users. Rather than using an unwieldy system that would potentially deter, Amara’s simple interface will allow prospective translators to get started quickly and show them the fruits of their labor almost instantaneously. In order to retain translators, we would like to use the YouTube platform itself by putting user names of translators in the credits of each video. In later stages we will look at a reward system as well. We may be able to do this with additional content for translators (newsletter, exclusive videos, etc.).
Maintaining Quality During Crash Course’s Localization Effort

When thinking about localizing content in another language using crowdsourcing efforts, there are a few important considerations that need to be made. How are volunteers being recruited or chosen? What kind of training or how detailed of a style guide are they being provided? Is the translation environment actively helping the translators produce high quality localized content? Are translators able to receive feedback on their previous work? All of these questions need to be answered when thinking about how to maintain a high level of quality in a crowdsourced translation effort.

First, Crash Course has a huge following including over 4 million YouTube subscribers, but that does not mean that they will all be able to work as volunteer translators. It would be best to include some form of testing during the volunteer translator application process. The translations do not have to be at a professional level, but we want to make sure that the quality meets a certain baseline standard. Upon review, any number of qualified translators will be added to our group of registered volunteer translators.

Now that we have the translators chosen, they need to know what to do. During our localization of Crash Course’s YouTube videos we will primarily be providing translated subtitles, so we believe it would be best to use Amara’s functionality to easily tackle this goal. Registered volunteers can learn about the process of subtitling through the very simple on-screen instructions and get to work right away. Amara will automatically make sure that the text is timed and will assist the translators in making any adjustments.

While we may be using Amara to do the actual subtitling, it will still be important for Crash Course to come up with a general style guide and more specific ones for each language. These will cover a lot of the basics of how to actually translate the content in the videos. For example, these are educational videos meant to explain concepts to people who may have no prior knowledge regarding the subject. As such, it will be important to use language that isn’t overly complicated and is very easy to understand, while limiting any technical terms that the viewer may not understand.

Lastly, the idea of peer review will be incorporated into our crowdsourced effort. Upon being registered, volunteer translators will have the option to not only translate content that hasn’t been translated before, but also to review content others have translated. Every video will have one initial review before being made public to make sure that there isn’t any mischief going on. After that volunteers can peer review other videos, and if they find a change they would like to implement, it will be noted. If enough people vote on making the change then it will be pushed through and the original translator will be sent a notification saying that one of their videos had a peer review edit. This can be used as a way for volunteer translators to also provide feedback for each other in order to continue to grow and develop as translators.