Sharing Vroom in Low-Literacy Communities

● International ● Accessibility ● Delivery Challenges

Pictured: Tostan facilitators pose with Amplio Talking Book devices.

Overview

Tostan needed a way to support Senegalese families in remote and rural communities in accessing Vroom Tips®. While accessibility is a core value of Vroom, Tostan still faced barriers reaching caregivers with low literacy. In these cases, video content is often seen as a good option. But the communities' limited access to technology was another major obstacle. Tostan needed something low-tech, inexpensive, and accessible.

Tostan
Dignity for All

Tostan is a West Africa-based nonprofit organization whose empowering three-year education program in national languages provides a foundation for all future community-led initiatives. Tostan supports partner communities to define and fulfill their own vision for well-being, leading to positive and lasting social change.

AMPLIO

Amplio was founded in 2007 to address global poverty by creating simple, cost-effective, technology-based solutions to empower low-literate people with access to knowledge.

Learn more: Amplio.org

Audio was a good option. Tostan recorded, translated, and localized Vroom Tips in an audio format. **They shared these prerecorded tips using devices called** Amplio Talking Books **(ATBs).** The ATBs guide the user with audio prompts and symbol-based controls (rather than text). The devices are durable enough for long-term, repeated use. By using ATBs to deliver Vroom Tips, Tostan reached thousands of engaged caregivers with Vroom.

Background: A Tool for Sustainable Practice and Sharing

Tostan's [Reinforcement of Parental Practices](#) (RPP) module empowers communities by sharing knowledge on early childhood development (ECD). To date, Tostan has implemented the RPP in 492 Senegalese communities.

In 2021, Tostan began looking for ways to increase RPP's sustainability. They wanted a leave-behind to support caregivers as they continued using and accurately sharing their new ECD knowledge. Tostan saw how the science behind Vroom aligned with what they share in their RPP module. It also doesn't require extra time or money. Caregivers could practice Vroom Tips anytime, anywhere. These tips could act as a bridge between Tostan's RPP module and ongoing caregiver practices.

"The Vroom Tips greatly contributed to our RPP module," shared Kalidou Sow, RPP project manager. "The people were very excited. RPP doesn't impose ideas, but rather gives caregivers new information. And they trusted us. But what they needed were practices to support them."

Tostan first needed to adapt Vroom Content for use in rural communites in Senegal. Tostan already had an [Adaptation, Localization, and Translation (A.L.T.) Vroom Content License](#). With this license and technical support from the Vroom team, Tostan began to translate and adapt Vroom Tips to the local cultural context.[1]

Challenge: Text-Based Vroom Tips Weren't Always Accessible

Translation alone wasn't enough though. Many of the community caregivers couldn't read the written tips due to limited literacy skills.

Tostan wasn't the first organization using Vroom to run into this challenge. Many grapple with ways to adapt text-based Vroom Content for low- to no-literacy caregivers. While one can model the "how-to" portion of a Vroom Tip, sharing the "why" behind them proves more difficult. It's harder to share the critical Brainy Background™ element without using text.[2]

> **How could these families access Vroom Tips at any time, given low literacy rates and limited technology?**

Tostan's existing radio partnerships could potentially address literacy concerns with audio. But it wouldn't address the need for a leave-behind to make sure caregivers continue to correctly practice and share the brain-building tips. Online videos were explored as an option that had worked in other places. Unfortunately, most rural communities in West Africa don't have wide access to the internet.

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[1] **What is an A.L.T. Vroom Content License?** *Anyone can use Vroom Content without changing it. This license is reserved for organizations who need to translate Vroom Tips. It can also be used to localize them for cultural context.*
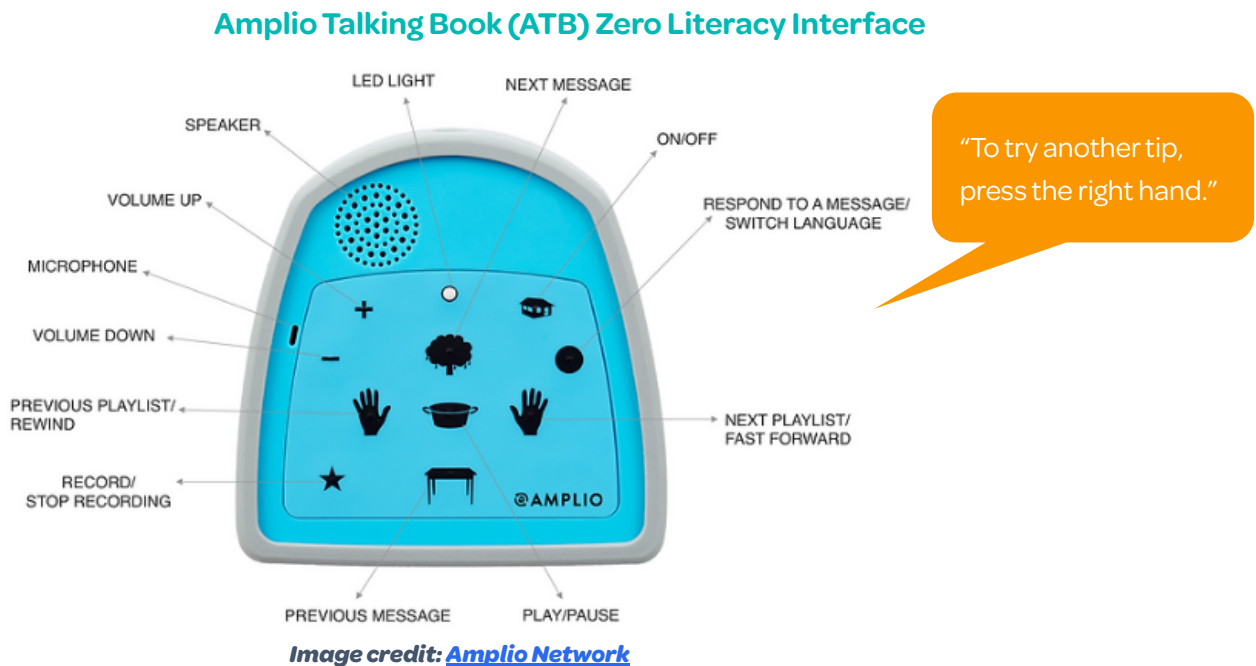
[2] **Why is the Brainy Background so important?** *Vroom shares the science of early childhood development with caregivers. Without the Brainy Background, a Vroom Tip becomes just an activity. Vroom isn't about telling caregivers what to do. It is about meeting them where they are. Vroom Tips must always be shared with both the Activity and the Brainy Background elements.*

Therefore, online videos wouldn't be a solution. **Tostan would need a new approach to equitably share Vroom Tips.**

Approach: Audio Tips on Amplio Talking Books

As a member of Vroom's Community of Practice, Tostan met with the Vroom team to discuss their challenge. Vroom then connected Tostan with nonprofit Amplio on a possible tech solution.

Their low-cost device—the Amplio Talking Book (ATB)—included multiple features that fit Tostan's needs. Organizations can record hours of content on ATBs in any language. Because of the built-in speaker, the ATB can easily be used in group settings. The only required electricity is to recharge the batteries. **Most importantly, the interface is designed for zero literacy.** Users are guided by common symbols and audio prompts to engage with the content.

Amplio Talking Book (ATB) Zero Literacy Interface

Image credit: Amplio Network

Tostan recorded native speakers reading the Vroom Tip activities and Brainy Backgrounds. Amplio then helped Tostan add the recordings to ATB devices.

Implementation: Sharing ATBs with Communities

Tostan's community engagement expertise helped them share ATBs with caregivers, families, and local leaders. Through workshops and home visits, they built trust and increased adoption of Vroom Tips via the ATBs.[3]

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[3] *See the Appendix for examples of Tostan's supplementary Vroom delivery methods.*

Group Workshops

Group workshops provided a safe, supportive space to engage with Vroom Tips. Facilitators brought ATBs preloaded with tips to community workshops. These workshops included caregivers who participated in the RPP program. Tostan also hosted workshops for religious leaders and educators, who learned how to use ATBs and their audio content. Facilitators modeled how caregivers could use the tips with their children. Participants then took turns practicing the use of the ATBs with facilitator support to gain confidence.

Home Visits

Family members needed to feel comfortable using ATBs on their own. Therefore, Tostan also added Vroom Tips and ATBs to their home visits. Family members—including older siblings and fathers—learned to use ATBs and saw how the tips supported positive ECD practices. The home visit approach helped more community members see the value of Vroom Tips for their children. The one-on-one connection also increased trust in the new device.

Sustainability

Tostan now leaves ATBs in the hands of the community. All initial participating communities have kept ATBs to use in communal events and to share with households. Each family gets a chance to borrow a device and use it with their children.

- The accessibility and **durability** of the ATBs support long-term community use.
- ATBs provide **equitable access to information** by using symbols rather than written language.
- **Anyone can use** ATBs without additional support.
- There are **no required software updates** or easily **breakable parts**.
- The only technical need is to **recharge or replace** the batteries.

> "As for changes, we can see that before, some people used to hide in their rooms, but now, after meals, people get together and use the tips and booklets to discuss things in the presence of the children. Our elders had stopped telling stories, but now they have started again at night with the children."
>
> Saré Sidy, Tostan community leader

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Outcomes

Tostan reached approximately 7,000 community members in 30 communities with Vroom Tips. **Literacy was no longer a barrier to accessing information.** To this day, caregivers continue to share positive feedback on these new tools.

> "The Amplio Talking Books are so important for the communities. Think of it as a neighborly ECD teacher whom they can trust. It's new and novel, so they really love it."
>
> Molly Melching, Tostan founder

Learnings

- **Creative sharing methods help overcome barriers.** Translation is often just the first step in adapting Vroom Content. Consider what barriers exist beyond language. How may your organization need to adapt content, including the right channel for information sharing?[4]
- **New information and tools are validated in a trusting relationship**. A new tool or technology can be difficult to adopt. If you take time to develop trust with a community first, a new tool—like the ATB—comes with that trust built in.
- **Partner with others to find a solution.** Vroom is proud to support an international network of brain-building organizations in addressing their unique challenges. Through the Community of Practice, Tostan shared their discovery of ATBs with other organizations who might benefit from this innovative tool in remote and rural settings.

Limitations

Technology Challenges

The ATB technology was new to both Senegalese families and the Tostan team. Tostan had several steep learning curves with ATBs. This included tip recording, tech support, and the built-in feedback feature. These challenges initially impacted how effectively ATBs were integrated into the RPP module and greater community.

"I will say that **every time we had a problem, Amplio was right there**. And we really appreciated that," said Molly Melching. Even with this remote support, occasionally Tostan still had to travel to the rural communities to fix hardware problems.

As with many challenges, more knowledge can empower communities to overcome these hurdles. In future uses of ATBs, Tostan plans to spend more time guiding facilitators on the technology. This will improve troubleshooting and the overall use of the feedback feature.

Conclusion

Vroom Tips continue to support Senegalese caregivers as they engage in positive adult-child interactions. By using ATBs, Tostan found the sustainable, practical parting gift for communities that had been missing in their work.

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[4] *To apply for an A.L.T. Vroom Content License, visit* vroom.org/for-professionals/adapting-vroom-content.

Appendix: Supplementary Vroom Delivery Methods

While the ATBs addressed literacy barriers, Tostan recognized the need for additional content reinforcement.

Video Visual Aids

Tostan hosted an ATB training session with local facilitators. The goal was to familiarize them with how to use ATBs and model tips. In the local context, traditional adult-child interactions look much different than the suggested activities of Vroom Tips. This made it difficult for facilitators to accurately model the tips without a visual reference.

Tostan developed videos for 24 of the audio Vroom Tips. These videos showed local fathers and mothers modeling Vroom Tips in French and local languages. Tostan facilitators used their own phones or computers to share the videos with communities. These videos greatly improved comprehension and accuracy when using ATBs to practice Vroom Tips.

Radio Programming

Radio programming alone was not an effective delivery model for Vroom Tips. However, radio helped Tostan create a Vroom "surround sound" for the communities.

Radio programs promoting Vroom Tips had a wide reach. The programs encouraged listeners to call in to share their own tips or ask questions. This expanded the conversation to many other communities in Senegal. Along with ATBs, radio supported social acceptance of Vroom Tips and other supportive ECD practices.

Resources

Tostan: Vroom Tip Videos (French)
- Tip: [Sons préférés](#)
- Tip: [Observateurs du village](#)

Tostan: Reinforcement of Parental Practices
- [Program Overview](#)

Amplio Talking Books
- [Amplio Technology](#)
- [Talking Book Program Map](#)
- [Tostan Q&A](#)

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