

Listo app seeks to overcome language barrier for moviegoers

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While viewing the movie "Iron Man 2" in 2010, Roberto Garcia watched as a man in the audience and a child sitting next to him were kicked out of the theater in Austin, Texas.

Their offense? The young man was translating the movie from English to Spanish by speaking quietly in the older man's ear, Garcia recounts. The whispering caught the attention of an usher, who ejected them for making too much noise.

The experience pained Garcia, 31, who was born in Mexico and moved to the U.S. in 2003 to attend the University of Notre Dame in Indiana on a track scholarship.

But it also formed the seed of an idea for a business venture for Garcia, who now lives in St. Louis and is co-founder and CEO of Listo, a startup based in downtown St. Louis.

In that theater experience, "I saw an injustice and I saw an opportunity," Garcia said. He has friends and relatives who speak Spanish and don't go to the movies because of a language barrier, he said.

For the past two years, Garcia has been working on developing Listo, a [smartphone app](#) that allows moviegoers to watch a movie in English and listen to a perfectly synchronized Spanish version of the audio track on headphones. Garcia plans to launch the app this summer and is in the midst of a series A capital campaign for additional funding.

Listo uses a smartphone's microphone to listen to the audio from a movie, which then syncs with a soundtrack in another language. Movie studios prepare soundtracks in alternate languages for release internationally.

It took two years to develop the app, and Listo has a patent pending. Garcia worked with St. Louis-based app developer Candy Lab, which is an investor in Listo.

Garcia said he is currently negotiating with movie studios to use their soundtracks. Under his current pricing plan, customers would pay about a dollar per movie to listen to an alternate language on Listo.

Garcia and his business partner, Nathan Merrick, see potential for the app with the growing Hispanic population in the U.S. who speak Spanish.

"There are more than 60 million people in the U.S. who speak a language other than English at home," said Merrick, 38, Listo's co-founder and chief operating officer.

"Hispanic is one of the greatest market opportunities - the market opportunity is huge," Merrick said. "When a major movie opens in the U.S., non- English speakers don't go to these movies."

For the [movie studios](#), Garcia said, the app offers an opportunity to broaden the audience for merchandise for sale that's tied to movies. "If you don't speak English in this country, you're probably not going to see 'Frozen,'" Garcia said.

The app also will allow moviegoers to listen to movie soundtracks in English - for hearing impaired individuals who need higher volume or for those who want to drown out fellow moviegoers chomping loudly on

their popcorn.

"This has the potential to go to any language," Garcia said.

Listo already has at least one competitor, MyLingo, which offered similar services beginning in 2014. Garcia said he's waited to launch Listo until the technology worked perfectly.

"To me, technology should just work," he said. "Our motto is 'we work hard so you don't have to.'"

Merrick joined Listo full time this fall after serving as vice president of franchise development for Fish Window Cleaning, a commercial and residential window cleaning business with operations nationwide.

Garcia quit a marketing job at Anheuser-Busch's U.S. headquarters in St. Louis in October to run Listo. While at A-B, Garcia was a brand manager for some of the country's best-selling beers, including Bud Light and Budweiser. In 2014, Garcia helped A-B's efforts to grow sales of Montejo domestically, the brewer's first Mexican lager imported to the U.S.

Garcia used his savings to fund Listo, and friends and family members are investors, he said. "I put half of my A-B salary into savings, and we've bootstrapped this," he said.

Being close to other entrepreneurs at their office space at T-REx, a co-working space and technology incubator downtown, has been beneficial, Listo's founders say.

Merrick recalled a recent day when he was creating a video and ran into a glitch while recording. "We went down the hall and asked someone a question and got an answer," Merrick said. "The St. Louis startup

community is really passionate about mentoring and helping each other solve problems."

"The next few months the focus is really on finalizing the technology," Merrick continued. "We want this to work with every smartphone and in every possible theater."

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