Gaelic Websites: A Survey

Prepared for Bòrd na Gàidhlig, March 2010

Introduction

This report is a survey of current Gaelic websites on the the world wide web. Within the remit is an examination of how helpful the web is to learners (of all degrees of fluency).

What this report is **not** is an attempt to survey every website ever written wholly or partially in the medium of Gaelic. Thus there is no review of such excellent sites as www.gaelicbooks.org, or of the Gaelic sections of public sector organisations. The focus is on sites which promote or deal with the Gaelic language, not on sites which merely use Gaelic as a medium for their own concerns.

I have adduced my own comments and criticisms on occasion but only as a point-of-view and not based on extensive user-testing.

Contents

Gaelic organisations

Bòrd na Gàidhlig

URL	www.bord-na-gaidhlig.org.uk
Size (approx)	4,330 pages
No of visitors	[unknown]

It is assumed that board members have at least as much information on this site as I have, but for completeness I include it here.

The site is bilingual, with Gaelic being the primary language. It is densely packed with a vast amount of material (witness the page count), categorised under twelve headings. The most frequently-updated section is the news area.

The site seems to attempt an awful lot -- arguably too much. It is the formal presence of Bòrd na Gàidhlig on the internet, so contains much corporate information (including profiles of board members). It is also a Gaelic "portal" for the language and so contains links to sites of general interest, articles on the history of Gaelic. It has a lot of to say (quite specialised in places) about formal education (schools and colleges), and information about adult learning is contained amongst this. Then there is news headlines, although this seems to lump together corporate press releases from the board with a more general

advertisement of events. Whilst the ambition to span all this data is laudable, it is my opinion that such breadth tends to produce a degree of paralysis in the average web user.

Suggestions

- Separate the sections of the site that deal with Bòrd na Gàidhlig (the corporate entity) from the rest of the site and consider placing this under a distinct domain name.
- Within this, consider how best to tailor the navigational categories so different types of user (teacher, public sector, journalist, general public, learner, academic, person looking for funding etc) can find what they need.
- Consider having a separate site where all the remainder of the information about Gaelic can go.
- This can be a combination of information about the language as well as a portal to Gaelic on the web.
- The homepage should make very clear reference to the pages (or links) for adult learners (as otherwise a Gaelic navigational schema may mean they never find them).

MyGaelic.com

URL	www.mygaelic.com
Size (approx)	7,930 pages
No of visitors	44,349 unique visitors pa

As with the Bòrd na Gàidhlig site, it is assumed that board members have all the information on this site anyway, but it is included here for completeness.

The site has a clear and logical navigation. It contains up-to-date news items related to Gaelic, as well as information about forthcoming events. Both these are made available as RSS feeds, meaning they can be embedded within other websites. There is also a substantial social networking element, and a related area for user-generated content. Although there is a clear and detailed section targeted at learners, there is no information on actual course times/locations.

This site suffers from a possibly mistaken perception amongst potential and actual users I have contacted: it is considered to be "the Gaelic Facebook". This has led to some disillusionment amongst those users. The prevailing consensus was that they had expected to find something similar to the Facebook experience and had been both puzzled and disappointed by what is actually offered.

Suggestions

- Identify the users of the site: is it targeted at beginners, established learners, fluent speakers, or all three?
- Facebook, for better or worse, is where the social networking is taking place and it is almost impossible to suppose MyGaelic.com can compete (indeed, published statements by Bòrd na Gàidhlig indicate it was never meant to fulfil this rôle). It therefore needs to be made somewhat clearer what having an account on MyGaelic can let you do. For instance,

once you have indicated your level of competence with Gaelic, you would thereafter see pages in the language of your choice.

- Improve and expand the "Gaelic Portal" aspect of the site (this is related to the first point also—the type of user will determine to some extend the initial configuration of the portal)
- If a "Gaelic Facebook" is an aim then consider sponsoring a translation of Facebook into Gaelic. It is already available in a large number of languages (including such frivolous ones as "Pirate").

Comunn na Gàidhlig (CnaG)

URL	www.cnag.org.uk
Size (approx)	437 pages
No of visitors	3,000 unique (?) visitors monthly

A well-presented and easy-to-navigate corporate site. CnaG takes a slightly different approach to bilingualism: all pages have side-by-side English and Gaelic. The regular updates to the site consist of news about CnaG (last update, at time of writing, 8th March 2010) and information about "events". The latter page is up-to-date but seems little utilised (only two entries shown). The links section of the site is useful and fairly comprehensive. They also have a section listing Gaelic-related jobs, which is the single most busy part of their site.

A subsidiary part of the website is the CnaG blog, comunn-na-gaidhlig.blogspot.com, which is used as a slightly less formal way of publishing content about the Comunn. According to Comunn staff, it has proved a successful way of publicising news and press releases, and the comments facility has been a useful means of engaging with their audience. The blog was "skinned" to resemble the main site.

The CnaG site makes no comprehensive attempt to gather information on Gaelic courses, events or resources; although they are perfectly willing to add these to their site if they are made aware of them. However, they did express some frustration that due to lack of resource -- there is no one dedicated website content manager -- they could not do all they would wish. They also expressed the opinion that a cultural shift was needed towards publicising courses on the net by organisers, so that it was a priority rather than an afterthought.

CnaG are also responsible for a number of subsidiary sites: www.iomairt-lochabair.org, www.invernessgaelic.org, www.speygaelic.org and www.sradagan.org. Iomairt Locabair has been recently overhauled and is being maintained (although its frequency of update appears quite low). The other sites are largely moribund however.

Clì Gàidhlig

| URL	www.cli.org.uk
Size (approx)	420 pages
No of visitors	1,000 unique (?) visitors per month (approx).

This site makes the most effort of all the sites reviewed to gather together information on the courses available to Gaelic learners. The site also offers easily the most comprehensive search functionality of any other site. Learners may search for a course by level (beginner, advanced), by delivery (full or part-time), or by postcode. The concept is extremely useful, although the actual interface is perhaps a little difficult to use. It was also noted that many of the courses returned by a search lacked date information, so it was impossible to know how relevant they might be.

Staff report that whilst they make every effort to include all courses, they do not have the resource to dedicate staff to this as they would like. Also, not everybody informs them about courses that are being run. They currently have courses listed under two categories (Clì and non-Clì, so to speak), but will probably merge them together. The site has a forum, but as it is hardly used they are likely to close it down in the near future.

Clì director, DJ MacIntyre, commented on what he saw as a lack of co-operation amongst the various Gaelic bodies. He felt that there was some duplication of effort.

BBC Alba (inc /foghlam)

URL	www.bbc.co.uk/alba
Size (approx)	4,680 pages
No of visitors	[confidential]
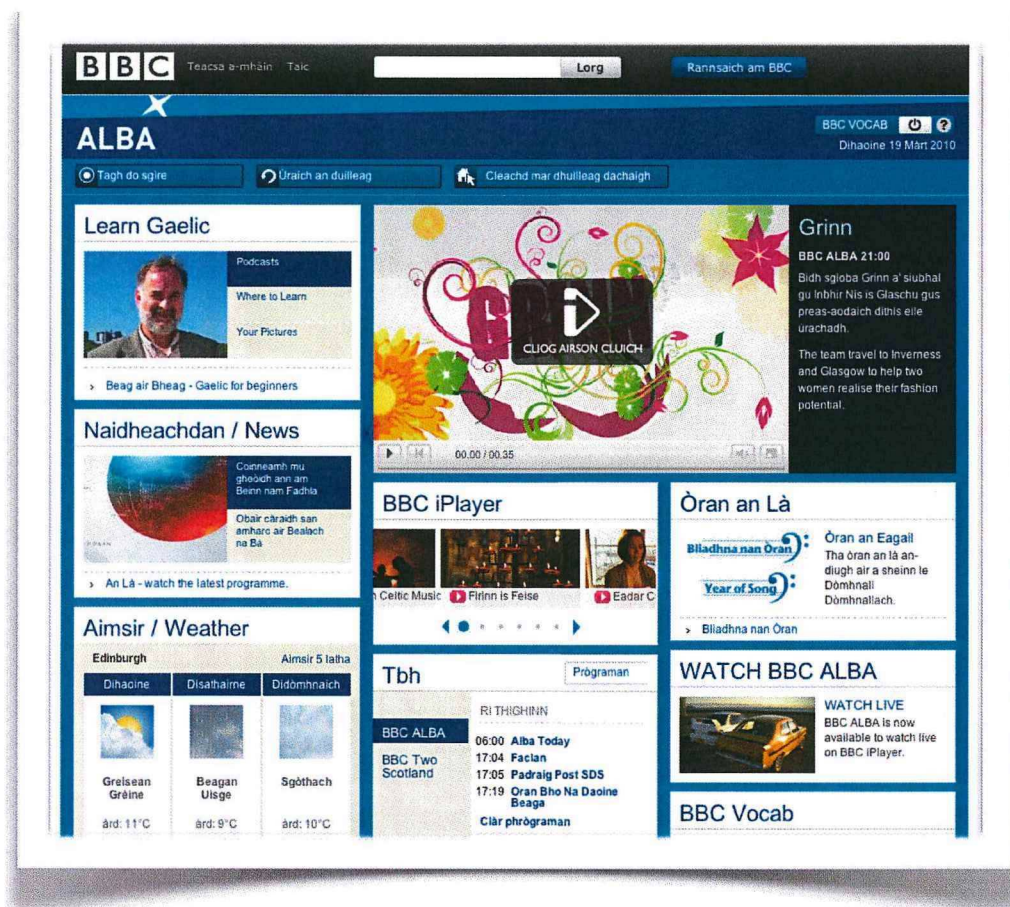
Although the BBC are unwilling to make public usage statistics for their Gaelic website, it is probable they are the most-viewed Gaelic site on the web. They offer learners popular resources (developed in-house):

- Beag air Bheag (an online course aimed at beginners)
- Colin and Cumberland (pan-media introduction to Gaelic)
- An Litir Bheag and Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh (aimed at intermediate/advanced learners)
- Air Splaoid (developed with the 2007 Highland Culture year, for beginners)
- BBC Vocab: more of a tool than a resource; shows translations of Gaelic words in BBC web pages.

The BBC have also developed resources for fluent speakers, including a website supporting the *Facal Oirbh* radio programmes and *Bliadhna nan Òrain* resources.

User surveys conducted by the BBC suggest that visitors to the site would like to see more up-to-date local news, local information about events, and local sports news, in Gaelic. However, the Beag air Bheag site and the Litir pages are consistently popular and see regular high traffic.

Gaelic Resources

Sabhal Mòr Ostaig

As might be expected, the Sabhal Mòr Ostaig website (www.smo.uhi.ac.uk) has information about the Gaelic courses offered by the college (An Cùrsa Inntrigidh, An Cùrsa Comais etc.). However it is also one of the most useful resources in the world for information about Gaelic on the internet.

Gaelic air an Lìon (smo.uhi.ac.uk/gaidhlig/gaidhlig)

This categorised list has a wealth of information not found elsewhere. Some of it is rather dated and the presentation is more academic-friendly than general-user-friendly, but there is very useful information about computing and Gaelic (how to generate accents, where to download spellcheckers -- although this is no longer accurate -- blogs, message boards, online grammar and literature).

One criticism of this amazing resource might be that it is so extensive, and so inclusive, that it is sometimes easy to overlook gems amongst dross.
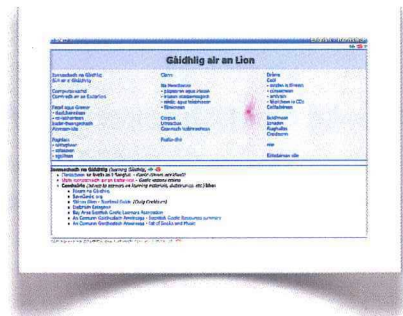
SBG (smo.uhi.ac.uk/gaidhlig/faclair)

The *Stòr-dàta Briathrachais Gàidhlig* is served from this page and is probably the single most-used online Gaelic dictionary. Several other historical dictionaries are also hosted here.

Lews Castle College

The Gaelic section of the LCC site (www.lews.uhi.ac.uk/news/gaelic) restricts itself to information about courses offered by the College–HE modules, Ùlpan and evening classes. It is up-to-date and accurate with this information.

Pròiseact nan Ealan

The website for the Gaelic Arts Agency (www.en.gaelic-arts.com), a national development body for the Scottish Gaelic arts. Various information about the projects the agency has sponsored is available (such as the St Kilda opera and the Great Book of Gaelic). The front page is a list of news items about arts events; however it does not appear to be frequently maintained. The most recent entry is dated 16 November 2009.

Fèisean nan Gàidheal

This is the site (www.feisean.org) of the organisation which supports the development of community-based Gaelic arts tuition festivals throughout Scotland. They have up-to-date information about festivals throughout Scotland, and make this available as an RSS feed. They also have a general news feed, but this contains much less data.

Online Dictionaries

- www.dwelly.info (Dwelly's dictionary, searchable and online)
- www.faclair.com (incorporates Dwelly, but adds extra information, including sound files. A work in progress.)
- www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/ArtsCultureSport/arts/gaelic/gaelic-english/

Dictionary (an online, searchable version of *Faclair na Pàrlamaid*)
(See also the SBG, mentioned above.)

Akerbeltz

Long-established resource site. Contains information about pronounciation, grammar, research, translation, and dictionaries. Run by Michael Bauer, who was also heavily involved in the faclair.com project.

Taic (www.taic.me.uk)

About 55 traditional lessons (eg lesson 1: "The Present Tense of the verb TO BE"). Also contains a forum which has recently seen some small amount of traffic, and a vocabulary/mini-dictionary. The site's lack of polish and basic presentation does not seem to deter those who find its content useful.

Gaelic Spellcheckers / Office Resources

- gd.openoffice.org The Openoffice suite, in Gaelic.
- www.ltscotland.org.uk/gaidhlig/taic/gaelspell.asp An Dearbhair, the new spellchecker developed for MS Office.
- www.sealgar.co.uk/spell.jsp A version of the Dearbhair packaged for Mac OS X.

Storlann Nàiseanta na Gàdhlig

Much more focussed on the educational sector than the general learner or fluent speaker. Nevertheless, they are working on some resources which are, or will be, of more general relevance. Particularly in the field of extending Gaelic vocabulary to encompass new concepts (most notably, perhaps, computing). This work is being carried out under the www.anseotal.org.uk domain but is (at the time of writing) incomplete.

Tobair an Dualchais

Ongoing project (www.tobairandualchais.co.uk) to digitise and catalogue Gaelic (and Scots) sound recording and make them available online. The first phase of the project is due to make several thousand hours of material available online.
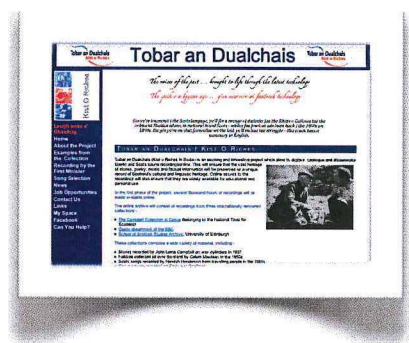
Gaelic Resource Database

An online (www.cne-siar.gov.uk/gaelic/grd.asp), searchable database of Gaelic resources (songs, oral tradition, periodicals etc). Has been online since 1999, and existed in stand-alone form before then.

Social Networking

Gaelic Guerilla

In effect an extended blog, although it is presented as a complete website. Deliberately informal attitude, reports on Gaelic news in English. Usually news items garner comment and discussion. Not updated that frequently, however.

Facebook

Interestingly Facebook is being used by several Gaelic BBC Radio programmes —Rapal, Pròigram Choinneach and Siubhal gu Seachd—as a means to engage with their audiences. It seems to be a successful strategy for soliciting comments.

Facebook also has Gaelic-related "groups" like **Gàidhlig na h-Alba** (http://www.facebook.com/group.php?v=info&ref=search&gid=2216292068) which allows like-minded facebookers to find each other. It also provides a useful list of Gaelic websites.

Twitter

Twitter, the micro-blogging site where users can post messages of no more than 140 characters at a time, features Gaelic in several ways (apart from people merely using it for their tweets). The most useful of these is probably the aggregation service found at twitter.com/GaelicTweets, which gathers together (aggregates, in the jargon) all tweets made on twitter by anybody who tags their tweet with the #Gaelic hashtag.

Blogs

There are several all-Gaelic or partially-Gaelic blogs on the net; the best way of keeping track of them is via Tìr nam Blog (www.tirnamblog.com), an aggregator.

Abair Thusa

This site (abairthusa.co.uk), developed by the same person (Cristean Macmhicheil) behind the GaelicTweets service is an avowed attempt to create an all-Gaelic version of Facebook. It has some members and shows some activity, although it is not clear how wide-spread that membership is.

General Suggestions

It is technically beyond the scope of this document to give suggestions about any aspect of Gaelic on the web. Nevertheless the following observations are offered in the hope they may be useful (even as straw men). They are obviously all suggestions for further investigation, and not firm conclusions.

"One stop shop"

Consider having a one-stop-shop site for Gaelic on the net, but one that clearly and unmistakably categorises its users to offer them what the want. (Use-cases, in the jargon.) E.g. "I'm interested in starting to learn Gaelic. How do I do that?" Or, "I've done an Ulpan course. Where do I go now?" Or "I'm a fluent speaker. Where can I find some quality Gaelic writing online?"

Amongst other things, this site could act as a central location for tools gaelic users will find useful. Online dictionaries. Computing information and software: how to write accents, check spelling, other software. Current provision is a little haphazard, and at at times obscure.

Authoritative, categorised, RSS sources

It is suggested that Bòrd na Gàidhlig have one central news and events website, where everybody has to (as far as this is possible) submit news of courses and events. Make this submission process as easy as possible — perhaps consider making it post-moderated (that is, checked over only after it is published). Have each entry in at least one "category", such as "adult learners courses". Insist that all entries are dated, and that old entries are automatically pruned.

Then expose this as several RSS feeds -- in sensible categories -- which anybody can embed in their own website. Ensure that this system is looked after by someone with it as part of their day-to-day funded duties.

Map-based course finder

Google maps are rapidly becoming ubiquitous. Consider taking a leaf out of Clì's website and having searchable database of Gaelic courses, but use a google map (with a date filter) as the interface.

Open, accurate statistics

Einstein said: "Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted." Nevertheless accurate and comparable statistics (ie using the same definition for "page view" or "visit") are a vital part of any web development plan.

It is suggested therefore that all sites supported by Bòrd na Gàidhlig have Google Analytics installed on them. This is simple, painless and free, and will allow accurate statistical analysis. Many sites currently appear to have at best a hazy idea as to how popular they are and what is working/not working on their site.

Appendix

Acknowledgements

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Disclaimer

Website statistics have not been collected with any rigour; nor have they been properly cross-checked for consistency. They are provided as a guide only.