

The future of the International Year of Astronomy 2009 website

Raquel Yumi Shida¹, Pedro Russo² & Lars Lindberg Christensen³

¹ IAU, ESA/Hubble (rshida@eso.org)

² IAU/IYA2009 (prusso@eso.org)

³ ESA/Hubble, IAU (lars@eso.org)

Abstract

The internet will, without doubt, be one of the most important channels connecting the International Year of Astronomy (IYA2009) activities with the general public. The IYA2009 website¹ went online in December 2006 and since then has served as the main communication tool between all the countries and agencies that are taking part in this event. Recently a new strategy has been applied to the IYA2009 project and its communication. The project has changed from catering mainly to internal communication needs (IAU <-> Single Points of Contacts) to communicating more with external groups and the wider world, including lay people. Some features of the current website will be demonstrated, and ways of using web tools to empower astronomy communication will be suggested. Plans for the future evolution of the IYA2009 website as new events and ideas come up before 2009 will also be discussed.

The IYA2009 website today

The current IYA2009 website was designed towards the end of 2006 with the principal intention of providing background information for organisations on different levels and the Single Points of Contact (SPoCs) that are the chairs of the IYA2009 National Nodes.

The structure of the website comprises a public area and an internal section, created to provide initial resources for the SPoCs to start acting to promote IYA2009 in their respective nations. By accessing the internal area with a login and password, they have access to resources that will help them to advertise IYA2009. Design kits with logos and banners in high resolution in different formats, brochures, posters, business cards, PowerPoint presentations and other documents are provided, together with their source files to allow for any necessary editing.

Every nation has a page in the IYA website where it is possible to add contact information, an introduction about any activities that are under way and further links. Each SPoC can also access tools in the internal section to edit this page.

There are already nearly 100 nations participating in the IYA2009, and we believe we have been successful in informing the National Nodes about our vision, mission and goals. It is now time to proceed to the next step and get closer to the general public. To do that, a new strategy and new tools must be adopted.

¹ <http://www.astronomy2009.org/>

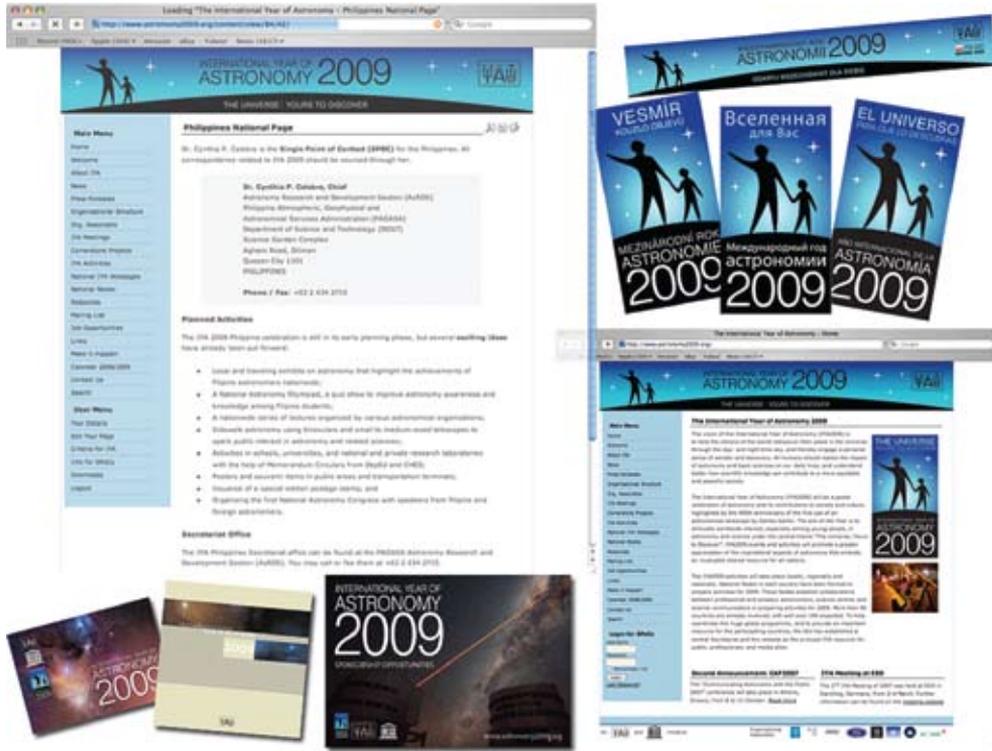


Figure 1 – Some resources available at the internal section of the website.

All figures courtesy of the authors

IYA2009 website v.2

The current v.1 website will slowly be transformed over the next few months into a v.2 IYA2009 website. v.2 is aimed at the general public. It will try to inspire and help people to engage in teaching and outreach activities in astronomy.

The navigation must be easier, the text simpler. The first action to be taken is to make it graphically more attractive and work on the existing texts to make them more understandable. Then various parts of the website can be given a new focus:

- On INTERNATIONAL
 - Language barriers cannot be broken, but as astronomy is a universal language, cooperation between nations is not impossible. In order to improve the communication between the organisers and the public, and between different nations, we are setting up discussion forums for both the SPoCs and the public.
 - Ways for easy data sharing between the main IYA website and the individual national websites will be introduced. Integration of calendars and information posts via RSS feeds will be part of the new website.
 - Support to the Global Cornerstone Projects will be provided.

- On YEAR
 - A Global IYA Calendar is being built. It will contain information about global activities, international and regional meetings, historical dates, and important sky events visible from not only a single site but from large areas on Earth. (Local activities and local sky events should be listed by each country in each National Webpage).
- On ASTRONOMY
 - The new NEWS section should allow the SPoCs to publish short notes with the results of their activities, as well as relevant pictures, videos and links for press clippings.
 - We are studying the possibilities of providing a dynamic online sky map which will plot the sky on a given time and geographic location. In this way beginners in astronomy will be able to plan observations of the sky with the naked eye.

Brief recommendations for the IYA2009 SPoCs

The primary goal of the main IYA2009 website is not to make the efforts of the secretariat more visible; it is to make the work of individuals more visible and help in promoting astronomy all over the world.

The success of the IYA2009 website and the IYA2009 itself depends not only on our work at the global level, but very much on the work of the National Nodes. We encourage every country to build its own national website, and here are some tips on how to do that and on how to make it popular:

- Bear in mind that users always expect website creators to speed up page downloads. Design is important, but it has to be conceived with the average visitor to your pages in mind. A website designed for a developing country is certainly different from a website for a developed country. Think about the hardware and the software that your target group will be using during the time you want your website to be online.
- Check if your country participates in social and educational programmes such as the “One Laptop per Child”² or “Classmate PC”³, and develop digital materials that are compatible with them.
- Make your website more visible by making links from other popular websites. Translate the existing Wikipedia entry⁴ into your own language; add links to your pages. Create user profiles and groups in social networking services such as facebook, MySpace, Orkut; upload videos in YouTube, mention IYA2009 activities in your publications, etc.
- There are many free services and downloadable programs on the internet that you can use to boost your pages, from complete Content Management Systems to html page templates or icons. Some suggestions of “user-friendly” programs (some technical knowledge may be required to install them) to download or to be used online:

² <http://www.laptop.org>

³ <http://www.classmatepc.com>

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Year_of_Astronomy

- Joomla!⁵ and its extensions – Joomla! is a popular open source Content Management System (CMS).
- Google Pages⁶ – Here is a quick way to build, host and publish simple web pages without any cost. No need to know html and no need to use complex software.
- Google Calendar⁷ – Organising the IYA2009 events is much easier with an online calendar that can be managed by different people.
- Google Analytics⁸ – This tool provides much information on visitors to your pages. Web activity statistics are desirable for as many participating sites as possible for inclusion in a possible final IYA2009 report.

If every National Node contributes by creating a national website and spreading the word about the IYA2009 and keeping us informed about progress, the International Year of Astronomy 2009 as a whole will succeed in communicating astronomy with the public.

The IYA2009 secretariat thanks all the SPoCs and National Nodes that have already started working on their websites.

⁵ <http://www.joomla.com/>

⁶ <http://pages.google.com/>

⁷ <http://calendar.google.com/>

⁸ <http://analytics.google.com/>