

A Survey of the College and University www Sites of Shillong, Meghalaya

BIKIKI TARIANG LALOO*

This paper examines the websites of five academic institutions (one university and four colleges) emerging from Shillong in Meghalaya to determine whether they are able to make their digital presence felt on the *World Wide Web*. The websites were analyzed and their content, design, multimedia features and currency evaluated. It was found that the websites coming from this so called remote part of the country are quite up to the mark and can easily give those of bigger cities a run for their money.

0 INTRODUCTION

The *World Wide Web* is now present in practically every office and household. We are involving it in almost everything we are doing -from buying groceries to getting an education. Its impact is far reaching so much so that even a so-called remote area like the north east of India is affected and majorly at that. There is almost a deluge of websites both personal and corporate emerging from this part. The academic institutions too are not blind to the enormous potential of the web. After all "Colleges and Universities need to think about their digital presence on the www. Prospective students, corporate donors, foundation researchers, alumni, journalists and others may visit the college for the first time via a college's www site and leave with a lasting impression of the institution." (Johnson et al, 1995).

Perhaps the above lines say it all. Which is why it is all the more important for an institution to present itself impressively on the www. For better visibility and accessibility there is nothing quite like it. Thus institutions in the northeast are now hooking themselves to the www with websites that are slick and quite indistinguishable from those of better known cities not only in India but also in the world.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Evaluation of websites or webpages is a fast emerging trend and enough articles on the topic have appeared both in print and on the Internet to confuse even the seasoned researcher. Literature has also been contributed by library and

* Lecturer, Department of Library and Information Science, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya 793 011 E-mail: bikilaloo@rediffmail.com

information science professionals. Their works have covered web sites varying from those of political parties, to the tourism industry to newspapers. Not to speak of the sundry articles on the evaluation of library websites.

College and universities have however not been well covered although most colleges and universities around the world have developed websites. In fact in the search for literature on the topic, only one article (Johnson et al, 1995) was found to be relevant but it proved to be a very comprehensive one. Four graduate students studying computer-mediated communication at the Teachers College, Columbia University surveyed 489 institutions that were present on the American Universities www site list in March 1995. Their actual goal was to provide higher education administrators with valuable information that may aid campus discussions about their digital presence on the *world wide web*. The work thus gives plenty of insight as to the way colleges and universities should present themselves on the web.

There is almost a deluge of works relating to the criteria for evaluation of websites. Most authoritative works (Kapoun, 1998, Tillman, 2001, Henderson, 2001, Barker and Saifon, 2002) stress upon criteria such as currency, design, reliability, coverage, and multimedia and these seem to have been followed quite religiously by the researchers working on the evaluation of various websites. For example Auty and Cowen (2000 and 2001) in their work on the websites of British political parties had content, design, interactivity, multimedia, currency and external links as criteria. While William and Nicholas (1999) working on the websites of print and electronic media had currency, hyperlinking, multimedia, customization and interactivity as criteria. In the work of Johnson et al (1995) which surveyed college and university websites: who created the site (designer), types of information available (content/coverage), directory services and elements of hypermedia were the criteria used.

Thus, no matter which category of websites is evaluated, the criteria remain more or less the same with only slight variations. The present study too sticks to the beaten track – especially following the criteria put forth by Johnson et al.

2 METHODOLOGY

Most of the institutions already have printed materials such as the prospectus providing necessary information. It was thus not difficult to find their websites as they were noted in the prospectus. A survey of five academic institutions was conducted since only. The North Eastern Hill University and four colleges are known to have website in this part of India. Websites of schools were left out of the purview of this study. Besides this, a look at the websites of four major universities in India (University of Delhi-²DU, Jawaharlal Nehru University- JNU, Delhi, Aligarh Muslim University-AMU and Benares Hindu University-BHU) was taken to see how similar or different they are from those of Shillong.

The survey reviewed the following qualities of the websites:

Type of information available (content)

Design

Multimedia features

The Websites are:

- 1 North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) - <http://www.nehu.ac.in>
- 2 Sacred Heart Theological College (SHTC) - <http://education.vsnl.com/shtc>
- 3 St Edmund's College (SEC) for boys - <http://sec-shillong.org>
- 4 St Anthony's College (SAC) for boys- <http://anthony.ac.in/anthony.html>
- 5 St Mary's College (SMC) for girls - <http://stmarysshillong.com>

3 RESULTS

About the academic institutions of Shillong being amongst the best in the country, there is no argument. Most were set-up by foreign missionaries and have stood the test of time. Their alumni are spread out all over the world and in professions ranging from films (Victor Bannerji) to high-level administration (J M Lyngdoh). The credentials of these institutions are impeccable and mention of their names still evokes respect. But what of their presence on the world wide web? This was what this study set out to discover. The results are given below.

4 DESIGN

First impressions are lasting. The content notwithstanding, it is usually the design of a website that catches the eye first. The websites from Shillong too seem to fall in line with those of the rest of the country though in some areas, they disappoint. The following was the impression this study got regarding the general presentation of the five websites.

5 DESIGNER

NEHU – Designed and hosted by the VSAT facility of NEHU (comprising eminent personalities of the University including the Registrar, some Deans and Heads of Departments).

SHTC – Designed by SHTC Communications.

SEC – Designed by St. Edmund's Computer Centre.

SAC – Designed by Department of Computer Science SAC

SMC – Designed by L Nongsiej of Global Infotech

51 NEHU

The University has one of the more striking homepages. The designers seem to have been influenced by the websites of the premier universities of the country. It is an attractive site with colours all over. The motto of the institution 'Rise Up and Build' with a red-cum-yellow border and the fonts in white, is placed at the centre. The institution logo in orange, yellow and green with an open book in the foreground is on the left. The main page has a menu system with links to other pages. It is thus not lacking behind the websites of the premier universities that were studied.

52 SHTC

In contrast to the NEHU site, this is quite staid - pretty basic. The name of the college is in red. The rest of the text is in black fonts with a green background. There are absolutely no pictures.

53 SEC

The first page has only a picture of Sir Edmund Rice the founder, with a prayer below. The name of the college is in brown fonts with a green background. The emblem in blue is on the left. There are coloured pictures in every page.

54 SAC

For all the hype about its five star status, it lags behind St Edmund's and NEHU. The name of the college in light blue with the logo is on the left. There is also a picture of the college. There are coloured pictures on the left for all pages.

55 SMC

The main page has coloured pictures at the top. The emblem of the college in purple and navy blue is placed on the left. A map of India with a blinking red spot on Meghalaya is placed below. Every page has two columns on either side of a picture in the middle.

6 CONTENT

"The design of a website may provide the skeletal structure but the substance comes from the content." (Auty and Cowen, 2000, 279). What type of information should be provided on a university website? Johnson and team created eight categories to synthesize and compare the types of information offered by the sites studied by them:

- general information about the university,

- general academic information, admission information,
- information for alumnae,
- information about campus activities or calendar of events,
- library access
- information from the public affairs/relations office
- specific departmental, school or college information

They also felt that "publishing college periodicals on the www is an efficient method of disseminating information to all constituents with whom the university needs to communicate."

As regards the information given by each of the websites there are many similarities as shown below.

61 NEHU

Every page is filled with information with links to other pages. Since the University has two campuses - in Shillong and Tura, information is given separately for the two. General information about the Shillong Campus includes historical background, information about departments (courses provided, intake capacity, faculty etc), administrative wing, admissions, hostel facilities, NEHUTA (teachers' association), NEHUSU (students' union), projects undertaken etc. Regarding the Tura campus, only information about departments is given.

Campus News, the online magazine gives information on bus timings, holidays, exams and the annual calendar. The design team reveals its sense of humour in its definition of some "common words" heard in the campus:

Problem - most common word. Sound starts from students, research laboratory to bank counter.

Difficult - very common word

Kwai [betel nut and leaf] - one very essential and popular item

One does wonder however what the sentences, "Some are like this, some are this and this," and "Take a minute and have a nice look for a moment," are meant to convey.

62 SHTC

The historical background of the College is given. There is also information about the library, the teaching staff, visiting professors, the governing body (with list) and a list of publications of the College with prices. As mentioned earlier - quite basic.

63 SEC

General information about the College is given with historical background and biography of Edmund Ignatius Rice the founder. The vision statement, mission and challenges of the College are also explained. Information about the different departments is provided with the email addresses of faculty and a contact link as also information about the admission procedure. There is an announcement about the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India, which provides a four months accountancy course.

64 SAC

There is information about when and how the College was founded with links to information about the founder saint John Bosco, the patron saint Anthony of Padua and also about the pioneers. Special mention is made of the five star status accorded to the college by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and its selection by the Foundation for Academic Excellence and Access (FAEA). The vision and culture of the college are explained. Information on the courses offered is given with links to the departments where further information is given in tabular form. There is information about the admission procedure. There is also mention of new initiatives as also the Student Development Service (SDS) and the library.

'*Campus News*' provides announcements of exams, achievements and obituaries. An interesting corner of the website is the 'Readers' Forum' or the 'Anthonian Pulse' that checks out the opinion of Anthonians on such varied topics as – the most exciting thing about the college and live-in relationships.

65 SMC

The College was founded in 1937 by the RNDM sisters says the website. There is also information about admissions (eligibility, documents required etc.), the morning assembly (the only college to have one), news and events, of which announcement about the alumni association meeting takes centre stage.

7 IMAGES AND MULTIMEDIA

The use of moving images and sound is what sets apart one website from another. Johnson and team imposed a rating system to evaluate the level of hypermedia in their survey. Hypermedia included photos, clickable maps and forms as also online applications about which they opined, "It is important that the virtual presence of a university is well represented but nice pictures and an abundance of information is not enough. It is very important that one would have the option to apply or even study at a university online." (Johnson et al, 1995). However even in their own study, only 6 out of the 489 institutions could be

applied to on the Net. Amongst the websites of Indian universities studied too, only DU allows for the downloading of application forms (by installing the Adobe Acrobat reader). There is no online application facility as such. The downloaded forms will still have to be submitted in person to the university office.

The websites from Shillong too do try to keep up although they still have a long way to go. Except for SHTC (which has only a blue rotating globe at the bottom of the screen) all the websites studied have black and white as well as coloured pictures. SEC provides a 'virtual tour' of the campus with links to the computer lab, the Archbishop and Principal, the main entrance, the college quadrangle etc. NEHU also has pictures for both the Shillong and Tura campuses. The motto 'Rise Up and Build' moves across the bottom of the screen (similar to that of JNU) and the speed of the movement can be increased/decreased, stopped/started with the help of a button on the right. SMC has a message about the alumni association meeting moving across the screen. SEC tries to be clever by filling in the 'under construction' pages (of which there are quite a few) with graphics - for example a rotating cube with pictures of fruits, people, a sunrise etc.

SHTC scores points only with the musical background with which each page opens. SEC also opens with the college anthem. This is similar to the 'Kulgeet' or anthem in Hindi and English given on the BHU website. But while the music on the Shillong websites appear automatically on opening of the website, that of BHU has to be downloaded.

8 DRAWBACKS

Impressive though they all are, the academic websites from Meghalaya need improvement in different areas. One common problem is the 'under construction' pages. With all the websites, the searcher hits a dead end when trying to reach some of the items listed in the menu. Mostly it was the information about alumni that went missing. SEC had information on quite a few of its departments missing. However this is a problem that exists even with the JNU website (the page on departments and branches, the Hindi version are under construction). The DU site too is "under active reconstruction."

In terms of design, the SHTC website is pretty basic. There are no images or pictures except for a rotating blue globe at the bottom of the screen.

Except for NEHU none of the other websites have external links. NEHU links to the National Informatics Centre, UGC (including the NET results), Naukri, Jobs db, Monster, SEC and SAC sites. NEHU is also the only one with a search engine (people search) - but the results are not always satisfactory. The required person's name may be mixed up with those having similar surnames. Also, though the website was last updated on the 30th of September 2002, the names of the new teachers who joined in April are not mentioned.

Where types of information are concerned, a common problem in most studies is that most of the time, the information comes directly from existing printed material that the institution uses, such as the prospectus and the viewbook. This was the problem with the university and colleges in Meghalaya and also with the universities and colleges in the USA studied by the Johnson team.

91 CONCLUSION

The effort taken by the academic institutions of the northeast to join the world wide web is truly commendable. It is also heartening to see how their websites are not lagging behind those of the rest of the world. If they can keep these websites regularly updated, there is no reason why they cannot make their presence greatly felt in the jungle of information that is flooding mankind.

REFERENCES

- 1 AUTY (C) and COWEN (A). (September 2000). The London Mayoral Websites: cyberdemocracy or cybermediocracy? *Aslib Proceedings*. 52(8): 277-284.
- 2 AUTY (C) and COWEN (A). (October 2000). Political Parties on the Net - 4 Years closer to cyber-utopia? *Aslib Proceedings*. 53(9): 340-352.
- 3 BARKER (J) and SAIFON (O) (July 2002). Evaluating Web Pages: Questions to Ask and Strategies for Getting the Answers. <http://www.lib/berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html>
- 4 HENDERSON (JR) (September 2001). The ICYYouSee Critical Thinking Guide. <http://www.ithaca.edu/library/Training/hott.html>.
- 5 JOHNSON (A), Mao (W), Mishler (S) and POPOV (V) (March 1995). A Survey of College and University WWW Sites. www.ilt.columbia.edu/academic/classes/TU5020/projects/he/higher-ed.html
- 6 KAPOUN (J) (July/August 1998). Teaching Undergrades WEB Evaluation: A Guide for Library Instruction. <http://www.library.cornell.edu/okuref/webcrit.html>
- 7 TILLMAN (H). (March 2001). Evaluating Quality on the Net. <http://www.hoprtillman.com/findqual.html>
- 8 WILLIAM (P) and NICHOLAS (D) (March 1999). The migration of news to the web. *Aslib Proceedings*. vol 51, no 3, 78-90.
- 9 OFFICIAL WEBSITE of Aligarh Muslim University - www.amu.ac.in
- 10 OFFICIAL WEBSITE of Benares Hindu University - www.bhu.ac.in
- 11 OFFICIAL WEBSITE of Delhi University - www.du.ac.in
- 12 OFFICIAL WEBSITE of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi - www.jnu.ac.in