

The ‘She is an Astronomer’ International Website: Shining a Spotlight on Women in Astronomy

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Abstract

Promoting gender equality and empowering women is one of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. She is an Astronomer (SIAA) has been a cornerstone project of International Year of Astronomy 2009 with the aim of supporting women working in astronomy and addressing gender issues. The SIAA international website (www.siaa.org.uk) has provided a focal point for activities, hosting information on gender issues in the field, including reports and statistics on women in astronomy, details of funding sources and training open to women, presentations and good practice guides, as well as a forum for women in astronomy. In addition, the site has been the public face of the project, highlighting the role that women have played throughout astronomy’s history and profiling the many inspirational women that work in astronomy around the world today.

In this poster, we will review the development of the website and attempt to evaluate, quantitatively and qualitatively, the effectiveness of the site as a tool for public engagement.

1. Introduction

After taking over as Chair of the SIAA Task Group in January 2009, Dr Helen Walker initiated the development of the SIAA international website. She assembled a team comprising Dr Quentin Stanley, who had been responsible for the development of the UK IYA2009 site and the Royal Astronomical Society’s website and two science writers, Anita Heward and Emily Baldwin.

2. SIAA Site Development

The SIAA international website was set up using the Joomla open source Content Management System (CMS). The CMS allowed all the web team to upload and edit information on the site, as well as to add plug-ins for polls.

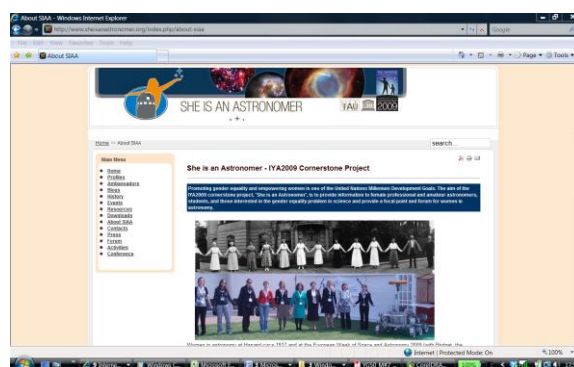


Figure 1: Screenshot of She is an Astronomer Website.

From the start, it was envisaged that the site would evolve and expand during IYA 2009, so at the time of the site launch, during the European Week of Astronomy and Space Science (20-23rd April 2009), a core structure had been developed with sections on profiles of women currently working in astronomy, women astronomers through the ages and resources for women in astronomy and people interested in gender issues. Throughout the rest of 2009 and into 2010, the site has continued to expand, with information added to all sections. The site’s history section now has articles on the work of 17 pioneering women astronomers and the resources section has information on funding and grants, good practice, support for women early in their career and returning from career breaks, training and books. The presentations from the SIAA conference, ‘Celebrating Success and Seeking Solutions’ have also been added. The list of women astronomers profiled has grown from 12 at the time of launch to around 75 at the time of submission of this abstract. The team hopes that, by the time the site is archived as a heritage website, it will include around 100 profiles of women and give a representative snapshot of the contribution that women are making to astronomy in 2009/2010.

In addition to the website, a SIAA opened a web forum (<http://forum.sheisanastronomer.org/>) in September 2009, which ran until April 2010. The forum was moderated by the same team behind the highly successful Galaxy Zoo forum.

3. Site Usage

Google Analytics/Joomla shows that the site has, in 10 months, attracted over 14 700 unique visitors to the site at the time of submission. Visitors are spending an average of around five and a half minutes on the site, an encouragingly high dwell time for this type of site

The most visited page is the profile of the Indian astronomer, Annapurni Subramaniam, which has received an astonishing 16 440 hits, almost a factor of 4 more than the next most visited page. The second most visited page was the historical profile of Maria Winkelmann-Kirch. The reasons for this are not clear at this stage, but we have the data available to look at this in depth in the future.

The geographical spread of visitors to the site is 40% UK, 30% USA, and reaches out to 128 countries.

4. Evaluation

The length of the average dwell time suggests that visitors to the site are finding it a valuable resource. Areas of interest included the profiles, history, conference, calendar of events and activities. In contrast with the website, the web forum rather struggled to get off the ground. Despite the efforts of a highly experienced and enthusiastic team of moderators, together with proactive efforts to promote the forum amongst the astronomy community, it became clear that although SIAA events and surveys showed that women valued opportunities to network and shared experiences, the forum was not the way that the community wanted to do this.

The site has been more successful than originally anticipated in many ways and, as a result, there are various ways in which the site could have been optimised to improve efficiency in uploading information. For instance, Google Maps could have been used to show the locations of the profiled women, which would require only co-ordinates of their institution to be entered, rather than manually updating maps.

6. Summary and Conclusions

SIAA project has been well received with the website reaching out to a global audience. There has been a huge interest in seeing what female astronomers have and are achieving - the interest seems especially strong from India. The conference provided a significant platform in bringing people together and the website will assist in bringing their ideas to the fore. However, the web forum did not generate the ongoing interaction between astronomers as hoped, although considerable effort was placed here too. The SIAA website will live on as a heritage site, hosted by the Royal Astronomical Society in the UK. In addition, an e-mentoring service is currently being investigated as an ongoing legacy for the whole SIAA project, ensuring that women astronomers, wherever they are working in the world and at whatever stage of their career, receive the support they need to achieve their potential

Acknowledgements

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