Recommendations Concerning Websites

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Arctic Council Secretariat

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Recommendations Concerning Websites

The Interim Report noted the importance of the AC and Working Group websites as the primary means of communication with the public on the AC. In addition to references to websites in the AC Communications and Outreach Guidelines, and any direction for websites that the Strategic Communications Plan will provide, the contact group felt it was worthwhile to offer the following recommendations to better promote the AC and its Working Groups on the internet.

The Interim Report outlined some challenges including:
  • the overuse of acronyms;
  • a structure and content that is not based on the needs of users;
  • the lack of processes to link the WG and AC websites; and
  • missed opportunities to promote the work of the AC, especially in conjunction with recent news events.

A common tool and responsibility
The AC website is managed by the AC Secretariat. It is a tool that can be used to promote the objectives of all AC actors. The responsibility for creating and maintaining AC website content rests on all AC actors, not just the AC Secretariat.

Content Review:
In addition to the Working Groups' individual websites, each WG has a page on the AC website as do AC Member States and Permanent Participants. AC Members should note that 70% of the visitors to the AC website come from AC Member States. The highest number of visits to the AC website occurs during and immediately following the Ministerial meetings every two years.

One of the draft communications objectives presented to SAOs is to better inform Northern communities about the work of the Arctic Council. One of the ways that Northerners are informing themselves on the Arctic and the actions that their governments are taking on Arctic issues is via the AC website.

AC Members and Working Groups should review the content concerning their organizations on a regular basis. This review should be coordinated by the AC Secretariat and be timed so that new content is available before AC Ministerial meetings. It implies an increased workload for Members, WGs and the AC Secretariat. There may be ways to make this process easier using feeds to pull content automatically from WG websites, however content posted this way may need to be reviewed for consistency. When contributing updated content, Members and Working Groups should use language that will not become outdated.

Recommendation 1. AC Members and Working Groups should review the content concerning their organizations at least once a year.

Content Planning:
The quality, relevance and timeliness of the AC website content could be improved through longer term content planning. This planning would be led and managed by the AC Secretariat with the input of all other AC actors.

- Content Features: In addition to the existing "static" content on the AC mandate and structure, the AC Secretariat could identify 4-5 topics to be featured on the AC website every year. These topics would be guided by the Strategic Communications Plan and could be informed by current events or important dates: eg. International Year of Biodiversity, oil and gas, International Polar Year. The AC Secretariat would seek input from the AC Members and Working Groups on which topics to feature, and for content concerning AC efforts for each feature.
- Press Room: A Press Room page exists, but could be improved through greater coordination between the AC Working Groups and the AC Secretariat. The page could include links to recent press releases issued by WGs or the AC Chair.
- News Feeds: The existing news feeds on the AC and WG websites draw the attention of readers to current events affecting the Arctic. However, they do not include any information on relevant ways that the Arctic Council is responding, and they may contain opinions not shared by AC Members and WGs, especially given the dominance of myths and misconceptions in the media. The contact does not recommend the use of news feeds on the AC and WG websites.
- News Stories: Before posting a news story on the AC website, the AC Secretariat should consult appropriate WGs in order to include content about AC work linked to the story. This will likely mean featuring fewer news stories and additional work for the Working Groups and Members. WGs should only post news stories that are directly related to their mandates, and should include content about their relevant work or research.

General Content about the AC
- Once the Strategic Communications Plan is developed, the content that provides an overview of the AC mandate, structure, members, etc. should be updated to align with the key messages in the plan. Additional content on the key messages of the plan should also be considered.
- A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section should be developed which would provide the answers to simple questions about the AC, its mandate and other factual questions. This could assist the Chair and AC Secretariat by serving as a place to refer basic enquiries, and could be informed by analysis of the keywords that are typed in the search engine on the AC website.

Using statistics to inform the AC website content
Since 2007, the AC Secretariat has been collecting statistics about the use of the AC website. However, the AC Secretariat has not been using this information to make decisions. This information can be extremely helpful for knowing who is being reached by the AC website.

For example, the Interim Report noted that nearly half of AC website visitors are located in English-speaking countries (US – 22%, Canada – 21%, UK – 5%). Only 4% of visitors are located in Russia. One could conclude that the fact that the AC website is written in English is promoting use in English-speaking countries. The lack of Russian-language content means that very few Russians have access to the information shared on the AC website. As the AC struggles to decide where scarce resources for translation should be allocated, a case could be made to create Russian language versions of some of the key AC website information (About the AC, Member States, Permanent Participants, Working Groups, etc.) and then measure whether visits from Russian speakers increase.

This is only one example. The statistics collected can also be used to decide which pages should be updated more frequently, which content is not of interest to users and should therefore be improved or removed, and how to increase the number of visitors to the AC website.

Recommendation 2. The AC Secretariat should use the statistical information collected on AC website usage to inform their decision-making and content development processes. The AC Secretariat should also include analysis of these statistics in their reports to SAOs on implementation of the Strategic Communications Plan.

Content based on the needs of target audiences and users
The Interim Report recognized that a visitor unfamiliar with the organizational structure of the AC may have a difficult time finding the information that they need on the AC website. The WGs are referred to primarily using their acronyms, and information on the projects and work of the AC and its WGs is presented according to the organizational structure of the AC – not by theme. In addition to being guided by the statistical information on the users of the AC website, the Strategic Communications Plan will provide valuable guidance on the AC target audiences, and content should be structured and developed accordingly.

Recommendation 3. The use of acronyms should be minimized. When they are used, their meaning should be spelled out at the first reference on every page. This is particularly important on the AC home page, on the Working Group overview page, in page titles and links.

Some ideas to make the AC website more user-friendly could include:
• **Sorting content by topic or theme**: Currently the only way to learn about what all parts of the AC are doing on a theme such as pollution or ice is to type the theme into the AC search engine. It would be interesting to create theme-based pages that could present a summary of the theme and link to relevant work across Working Groups on that theme. This would require the close collaboration of Working Groups and the AC Secretariat. When sharing content to be posted on the AC website, WGs would indicate the 2-3 primary topics or themes associated with the content, which the AC Secretariat would use to link up the content appropriately with the thematic pages.

- **Sorting content by target audience**: Some websites such as UNEP structure their content by target audience such as for scientists, students, governments, media, etc. Once the AC's target audiences are approved in the Strategic Communications Plan, pages for each key target audience could be developed that link to content relevant for that group. Working Groups and the AC Secretariat would need to collaborate to identify which content would be of interest to each audience.[1]

Closer Links with the Working Groups:
Both the Interim Report and the options and recommendations above call for greater integration between the AC Secretariat and the Working Groups. Measures in this regard include implementing Recommendation 14 of the Communications and Outreach Guidelines which states that "the AC logo should be displayed prominently on all [. . .] websites intended for public use that are produced by [. . .] Working Groups."

In addition, a specific process should be developed to ensure that Working Groups inform and provide content ahead of time to the AC Secretariat about upcoming news-worthy events, work or releases, such as the publication of assessments and reports. This will ensure that resources within the AC such as AC and WG websites are used to the fullest to promote the work of the organization.

Participants had differing views on whether there should be a common visual identity for the Arctic Council over and above the use of the AC logo. This discussion was primarily focused on the "look" of the AC and Working Group websites. Proponents of a common identity emphasized that this would obviously demonstrate the link between the AC and the Working Groups. Others did not feel that the investment in developing and implementing a common visual identity would result in enough of an increased awareness of the AC and its subsidiary bodies to be worthwhile. There was no consensus on this proposal.

Contact group participants raised the separate (but interrelated) proposal to merge the AC and Working Group websites into one larger website. There was no consensus on this proposal.

Advantages:
- Lower cost: Some WGs have in kind agreements with other organizations for the hosting of their websites, and many WG members maintain the websites on a voluntary basis. However, a cost savings could likely be obtained by having only one site.
- Consistency and Professionalism: By having a single (or fewer) individuals with significant experience in e-communications manage the websites, the quality of the AC and Working Group websites would likely increase and/or become more consistent across the organization.

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[1] AMAP indicates the target audiences for their popular assessments or reports. The AMAP website is currently being upgraded, including to better tailor content to particular target groups (and make it possible for these to customize the site to meet their individual preferences).

- Branding of the AC: A single website and common visual identity would make the link between the AC and the Working Groups more obvious.

Disadvantages:
- The Working Groups now have full control over the content of their websites. Having a single website would likely mean compromise on content, layout and look of the site to accommodate the needs of so many groups.
- If one individual was responsible for posting and updating website content, WGs would probably experience more lengthy delays in having content posted than they currently do.
- The cost of redesigning the AC and WG websites will be high.
- The branding benefits are difficult to quantify.

Given the diverging viewpoints and the investment of time and funding that would be required, further thought and research is required on this topic. For example, the Communications and Outreach contact group has not undertaken a study of the cost associated with the AC and Working Group websites. The contact group has also not done a cost-benefit analysis (number of visitors to the website vs. cost of the site) of the AC family of website relative to the websites of other regional organizations (eg. Barents Euro-Arctic Council, Norden, Council of Baltic Sea States). This research and these questions could be considered by the developers of the Strategic Communications Plan.

> **Recommendation 4.** Working Groups shall inform and/or provide content concerning important assessments, reports or news-worthy items to the AC Secretariat ahead of publication. The AC Secretariat, in consultation with Working Groups, shall develop a process for the Working Groups to follow when submitting content for the AC website

Many of the suggestions and recommendations above are common practice in the area of e-communications. However, an updated and relevant website that evolves and contains fresh, valued content requires dedicated resources armed with the requisite experience and knowledge. This function should be prioritized and supported within the AC Secretariat.