

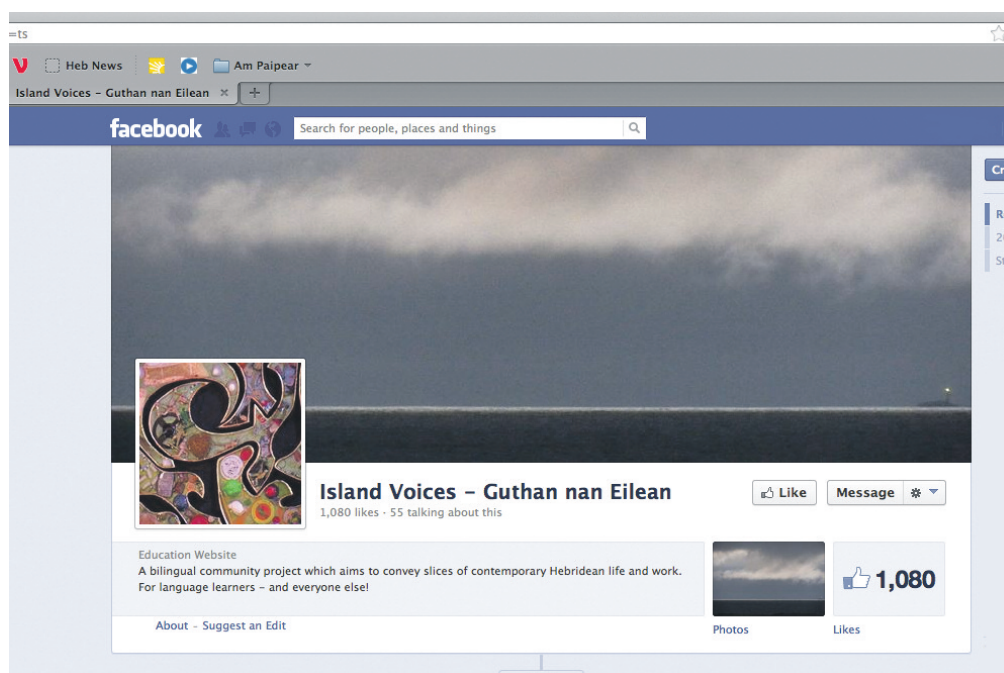
Language in a new dimension

In the December 2011 edition of *Am Pàipear*, Gordon Wells reported on a research project he had undertaken in Uist for the *Soillse Gàidhlig* research network. Gordon conducted another study earlier this year. He summarises and discusses the findings here...

THE previous study focused on how local people felt generally about learning and using *Gàidhlig* in the community. In this follow-up I was keen to dig a little deeper into how we use, or can use, modern technology – and computers and the internet in particular – to support active day-to-day *Gàidhlig* use and learning.

As before, I based the research on a series of interviews with *Gàidhlig* learners and speakers up and down Uist, many of whom had contributed in various ways to the bilingual Island Voices/*Guthan nan Eilean* project. The project encourages local folk to create short articles or stories, be they video or audio recordings or written pieces, and publish them online, for example on *Am Pàipear*'s own website. Viewing statistics show it's an increasingly popular feature for 'visitors', both local and worldwide!

The study itself focused on three main issues, not in a "number-crunching" way, but more from the point of view of discovering some of the preferred ways of using the new communication channels that modern technology offers us, and what place *Gàidhlig* has "in the mix". Not much, you might at first think – but it was very interesting to find out about some of the many different ways in which "ordinary" folk are using the new technology to suit



The study explored the place of *Gàidhlig* within new communication channels like Facebook.

their own needs. Of course, a lot of us are on social media now, and find it useful or fun in various ways – but local usage by no means starts and stops with Facebook!

So, to the questions. The first one aimed to find out how people used the various "forms" of communication available – texts, pictures, videos, audio recordings and so forth. While it comes as no surprise that most prefer to read and write in English, those who had experimented with sound recordings often found they worked very well in *Gàidhlig*. And why wouldn't they?

Gàidhlig speakers have been using the phone for long enough! But how many know that you can record yourself on the internet now, simply by dialing up and leaving a voicemail? As many of us know, some of the best *Gàidhlig* is spoken by people who rarely read or write it. The new technology offers the chance to capture loads of good spoken *Gàidhlig* online – which could be very helpful to other speakers or learners in many different ways.

The second issue looked in more detail at *Gàidhlig* speakers' bilingualism and the

recurrent question of whether that particular glass is half-empty or half-full. When it comes to media production, computers rarely, if ever, operate through *Gàidhlig*. Written instructions on how to make a recording, for example, will be given in English. Does this mean you can't produce *Gàidhlig* material? Well, no! *Gàidhlig* speakers, of course, are well able to use their perfectly good English skills to find their way through the technical processes, such as they are, to produce a spoken *Gàidhlig* end-product. While some dedicated programmers are doing great



Gordon Wells has been studying how modern technology can be used to support day-to-day use and learning of the *Gàidhlig* language.

work in making more software available in the language, there's really no reason to wait around until you can read the instructions in *Gàidhlig* when you could already be making good *Gàidhlig* recordings right now...

And what's the point? Does it, can it, make any difference to *Gàidhlig* use in the community? That's the third question. And the initial indications were positive. A number of participants, fluent speakers and learners, whose recordings had been put online, reported that they had positive reactions to their efforts, no matter how modest they might be. These varied from Facebook "likes" to encouraging comments, and both known and unknown people coming up to them in the community and speaking *Gàidhlig* to them, in a way which they would never previously have

expected. Knowing who to speak to in *Gàidhlig* can be a bit of a thorny issue sometimes, with the result that people simply opt for English "by default", but if you've shown your willingness to use *Gàidhlig* by putting your own voice online, then that's a clear and courageous signal, to which others will often respond very positively!

Now, probably most of us are quite reluctant, at first, to record our own voices. It can take an effort of will, but once you've done it once you may well find it gets easier. If you're interested please take a look – and a listen – at the Island Voices site, www.guthan.wordpress.com, for some great examples. You can also find the full "digital literacies" research report on the website. If you would like to try it out, call Gordon on 07879 644984.

Ena MacDonald writes...



IT was a privilege to be invited to attend and take part in discussions at the Eighth Annual Forum of the European Co-ordination 'Let's Liberate Diversity' in Basel, Switzerland.

Twenty-eight countries were represented and 178 people were present. Some came from as far away as the Philippines, Mali, Macedonia, Bosnia, Croatia, India, Iran, West Africa and Peru.

All of these people were small farmers or representatives of them, and all passionate about what they were trying to achieve. This year the title was 'From Planting to Plate' and the main subjects were seed and livestock.

The Scottish Crofting Federation is one of the founding organisations, and it was amazing to discover how all these people knew about crofters and warmly welcomed us. Governments are trying to dictate that small producers cannot store their own produced seed for planting the following year. Not just corn seeds, but vegetables and fruit as well.

They insist it must be certified and come from mainly large scale producers. The farmers want to continue selling, planting, and

swapping their own seed, just like we do here with oats, rye and barley. They do not want to bring in foreign species. The Peruvians told us how they got the support of three thousand small farmers and won their fight. The livestock discussions were similar, and there were stories about small poultry farmers anxious to keep their rare breeds.

One Italian spoke about the Ancona hens he has, and I was telling him that my mother had them in the fifties!

My responsibility was to explain how cattle breeding has changed on our islands to satisfy the market. Also the problems young crofters and new crofters have obtaining land and Single Farm Payments. In addition, the lack of government support for moorland grazing.

We discussed electronic tagging, and compulsory vaccination. It was all very interesting and hopefully governments will listen.

We had one afternoon sightseeing. I think Switzerland is a beautiful country, so green and mountainous - we could see the snow-covered Alps in the distance. We visited an orchard

where 350 different varieties of apples grow. I thought there were only about ten different varieties...I don't think I want to drink or even look at apple juice for a long time!

A rare breeds farm was also visited, where we saw some of the original Brown Swiss and the old type of Simmental, which looked much smaller than what we see here today. There were also four Highland cattle there.

When the Conference was over, I travelled by train to Cologne in Germany where I was met by our farmer friend Axel. I was there in 2002 when I was on the Eorpa programme talking about the Over Thirty Month (OTM) scheme. It was great to see the Highland cattle that we had exported in 2006, also the young heifers that left here early this summer. It was lovely to see Morag come running towards me when I called her in *Gaidhlig*. I wonder if she was homesick!

It was all a very memorable 8-day trip, and my only disappointment was that my luggage never arrived, and I never got it until I got back to Glasgow.

WHEN I was in Germany, my mobile rang. Here I was trying to forget about hens, chickens, cats and dogs.

"Granny, its Alexander, and I want to ask you something. Granny, you know the old wheelbarrow that is upside down, well, I found a hen hiding there, sitting on eggs, and if the chickens come, where will I put them? It is one of my red hens, Granny."

I assured him that all his red hens were together before I left home, so, as it takes 21 days for the chickens to hatch she would be OK until I came back.

"Granny, when are you coming back? I will watch her until you come. Belle is still in the stable, but she is OK."

I am glad to say that when the 21 days were up, no chickens arrived and the hen abandoned the eggs. Alexander was disappointed, but chickens in October were not to be welcomed. Poor Belle, Alexander's pet hen, died last Sunday and Alexander was in tears. To be honest, I was sad too. She was so special and even knew her name. But, as she was in her teens, for a hen I think she

had a good long life. Alexander and I buried her on the machair in a spot that he chose.

WHILE away, I was also able to spend time in Renfrew and Ayr. It was lovely to see family and friends. Despite the excitement of seeing new places and meeting interesting people, there is nothing better than being with your own folk.

Then it was good to be home and my dog Rocky was so happy to see me. He was very bad when I was away and fought with Ròn, Angus's labrador. Ròn bit him above the eye and Geert had to stitch him up!

OCTOBER weather has been great, warm, dry and calm. The Lochmaddy cattle sale held on 18th October was probably the best ever. It was great to see everyone doing so well. The good summer grazing definitely made a difference and the calves were in top condition. Let's hope that prices continue like that.

A REMINDER: Crofting Register workshops will be held on 11th November in the Dark Island between 5.30 and 8.00pm.