



Gaelic Digital Literacies in a Bilingual
Community:
A Sampling of Practices and Preferences

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Abstract

This study follows on from a 2011 exploration of perceptions of Gaelic learning and use in the same Uist community. It examines the local use of multimodal digital literacies as a social practice. The Guthan nan Eilean language capture and curation project is presented as a case study in the development of User Generated Content with a community focus. Online viewing statistics indicate a constantly growing audience that extends far beyond the islands.

Specific research questions put to a sample of Gaelic-supporting residents address digital literacy practices and preferences in the contexts of multimodality, bilingualism, and community impact. Participants find value in capturing spoken language in digital format, irrespective of their written skills in Gaelic. They are comfortable using their bilingualism to support the production of Gaelic output. Indications are also obtained that placing digital content in the public domain can encourage wider use of Gaelic in community settings where English might normally be the default language of communication.

Individual community members are liable to develop their own creative preferences within the range of possible activities that digital literacies enable. Project participants took a positive view overall of their engagement with new approaches to content generation, and had many suggestions for further development. It is felt desirable to have a level playing field in relation to broadband connectivity for all areas. A wide range of Gaelic and community interests and projects stand to gain from further development of this field of work.

Acknowledgements

This study could not have been conducted without, first and foremost, the active and willing cooperation of the community participants, to whom I express grateful thanks. This certainly includes all contributors who were prepared to be interviewed and give up further time to engage in follow-up communications relating specifically to the present study, but also takes in all other participants in the various phases of the Guthan nan Eilean community project, which provided much of the context within which it was possible to conduct this research. I am also indebted to Professor Rob Dunbar of the Soillse team for his advice on Research Question formulation specifically, and to Professor Richard Johnstone who provided highly valued informal advice and suggestions on the compilation of this report.

Gaelic Digital Literacies in a Bilingual Community: a Sampling of Practices and Preferences

1. Background

1.1 Introduction

The present study reports on a research project conducted by Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (SMO), Scotland's Gaelic College, with the support of the Small Research Fund of Soillse, the inter-university Gaelic research network.

The study was conducted over a 7-month period from October 2012 to May 2013 in the Outer Hebrides between Berneray and Eriskay. The principal researcher was myself, Gordon Wells, Uist-based Projects Officer for SMO.

The project follows on from the earlier exploratory study of local perceptions in relation to Gaelic learning and use in the same community, reported in Wells 2011. The focus here is on a particular class of actions and skills, those involving the “new media”, which was identified in the previous report as one potential positive way forward from the situation there described.

The previous report was published online, with the link¹ shared through the local “Guthan nan Eilean/Island Voices” community project. It was discussed at a series of public meetings², and a summary was printed in Am Pàipear, the local community newspaper, all in the interests of keeping community members informed and involved in the issues identified.

The full report, while being well received as an academic paper, was not necessarily an easy read for lay members of the community. It's a difficult balance to strike, but the orientation of the present follow-up project leans still further towards the local Uist community as the primary body to whom accountability is owed. While the research method and protocols retain the same academic standards of the first study, any intricacies of theoretical debate are kept to a minimum, in order to ease readability. At the end of the report, readers who wish to explore more complex issues in more detail are directed to a short selection of online sources for further reading.

Also in the interests of wider accessibility, and in view of its subject matter, this paper has been written specifically for online reading and includes live links to various multimedia webpages. In a small island community access to academic papers in hard copy is far from easy, so all references to further reading are also restricted to online sources. It is, of course, open to readers to print off a copy, but they should be aware that this will not afford them the full “multimodality” of online digital access.

¹ <http://guthan.wordpress.com/2011/09/22/gaelic-in-a-bilingual-community-research-report/>

² <http://guthan.wordpress.com/2012/02/17/meeting-local-language-patterns>

1.2 “Digital Literacies”: Media, Language, and Learning Contexts

Given the need for clarity for a non-specialist readership, it is important to give some sense of what is meant by the term “digital literacies” as it is used in this report, without wandering too far into a theoretical debate in search of a precise and “watertight” definition. A broad overview of the contemporary “new media” environment, coupled with some discussion of how it interacts with language and learning issues may help to establish that understanding.

McConville 2012, also writing for Soillse, provides a clear introduction to, and overview of, the new communicative channels available through the Internet, particularly since the advent of “Web 2.0”, in his report on the Glasgow University Gaelic podcasting project. In sum, a wide range of new modalities is now available to any individual with a computer (or smartphone) and a broadband internet connection, enabling them to go well beyond the confines of written text when producing or accessing technically mediated communication.

This can include written language that is graphically enhanced, through the easy use of digital photography for example, as well as audio and video recordings, including both music and prepared or spontaneous spoken language. Furthermore, dissemination of these digital communications has been greatly expedited, initially through the now widespread use of e-mail, and more recently through the advent of “social media” networks, such as Facebook and Twitter.

New modalities require new skills on the part of individual creators in order to exploit them. A “narrow”, skills-based, definition of “digital literacies” would encompass those additional capabilities that are required to participate productively in these new media, taking in, for example, the ability to create and send e-mails, or record a soundfile or video clip and place it online, or upload and share songs or pictures on Facebook. These are just illustrative examples, and by no means form an exhaustive list.

A “richer” interpretation of the term “literacy”, often used in an adult education context, incorporates a “social practice” perspective, by which a more rounded appreciation of the activity can best be achieved through a consideration of the wider social context in which it is practised, and of the purposes for which it is deployed, rather than by an isolating focus on individual skills or competences alone. In a UK language teaching context this approach has had a notable influence in the teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) through, for instance, and to give but one example, the ActionAid “Reflect for ESOL” movement, well summarised in the Sutter 2012 discussion of a general “social turn” in English language teaching.

By extension, an analysis of “digital literacies” can be taken to include due consideration of the community context in which the kind of technical skills mentioned above are deployed, and of the social needs their use is intended to meet. This is relatively unresearched territory in relation to Gaelic. While the McConville study looks specifically at a podcasting project within a university student community, the parameters of the current project are set wider, looking at a

range of possible media genres, limited only by the creative imagination and technical competence of participants who may come from various sections of the adult Uist community.

1.3 Community Project Case Study: Guthan nan Eilean – Island Voices

1.3.1 Project Description

In the 2011 report I made brief reference to the Guthan nan Eilean (Island Voices) materials development project³, a bilingual (English and Gaelic) partnership between SMO and Cothrom, the Uist-based community training group. This project requires more extensive coverage in the present report, both because it has developed in a new direction in the intervening period, and because it has formed a large part of the community framework through which this research study has been developed and delivered.

The project's development can be divided roughly into two phases. In the first phase (up to 2011) the emphasis was on the production of locally generated video material by project staff. The material was placed online, with its primary purpose being construed as graded listening materials for language learners (though it was anticipated from the outset that there would be likely to be a wider “general interest” potential audience for materials presenting “slices of Hebridean life and work”).

The videos were divided into two genres. On the one hand, short documentary pieces were created, showcasing a local workplace, community event or venue, accompanied by a carefully scripted commentary that to some extent took into account the likely needs of its language learner audience. On the other hand, these documentaries were complemented by “talking head” interview clips, in which community members with a close connection to the topic at hand delivered some authentic speech commentary. All clips were transcribed by project staff, and the transcripts also placed online.

Since 2011, project staff have largely withdrawn from taking a leading role in further materials production. The ground was laid early in the year on the project blog⁴, and in this second phase of the project (which still continues), the emphasis has been on encouraging community members themselves to experiment with developing “User Generated Content”. This can be in any mode they choose, including written texts, photographic slideshows with accompanying soundtracks, or plain audio podcasts as well as video clips. It remains a bilingual project, so contributions in both Gaelic and English, or both simultaneously, are welcomed within the context of aiming to maintain a roughly even balance between the two languages.

The project has also linked up with Am Pàipear, the local community newspaper, so that participants may, if they so choose, see their work published on a special Am Pàipear

³ <http://guthan.wordpress.com/about/>

⁴ <http://guthan.wordpress.com/2011/01/25/next-steps/>

Guthan/Voices webpage⁵. The college nevertheless retains a connection with the project, offering language or technical assistance to any would-be participants who seek it. This strong community connection is mutually beneficial, also enabling the college, for example, to test new software developments such as its “Clilstore” online dictionary program in a community setting, and invite feedback⁶.

A visit to these pages will reveal the wide range of contributors and contributions from the local community, ranging from short and simple written⁷ texts or spoken⁸ pieces by early stage learners up to a half-hour oral reminiscence⁹ between fully fluent speakers. It may be seen that the project’s approach, particularly in its second phase with its emphasis on community participation rather than professional direction, sits well alongside a “social practice” stance in relation to digital literacies.

A fuller project description, written from an English teaching perspective but nonetheless relevant, is available in Wells 2012. This also fleshes out the “added value” rationale behind the positively bilingual approach of the project, which establishes agreed legitimate space for both major languages in the local community repertoire.

1.3.2 Viewing statistics

The main emphasis of this report is on giving a qualitative account of practices and preferences. However, the ready availability of data through the automated statistical analysis services associated with the online platforms that Guthan nan Eilean uses also facilitates the presentation of some indicative quantitative measures of the online reach of the project.

The “online home” of the project is a Wordpress.com site¹⁰ – a free standard “off the shelf” platform, widely used by bloggers worldwide. Table One shows how visits have grown on a monthly basis since the site was established in June 2009.

Table One. Guthan nan Eilean Wordpress views up to 1st May 2013

Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
2009						49	42	55	68	57	28	48	347
2010	93	259	272	414	629	1174	721	448	446	447	443	395	5741
2011	632	505	510	358	536	412	324	277	414	419	473	421	5281
2012	394	1015	885	686	988	552	454	495	1031	727	980	650	8857
2013	674	992	1227	848									3741
Total													23967

⁵ <http://www.ampaipear.org.uk/guthan-voices/>

⁶ Eg <http://www.ampaipear.org.uk/2013/05/eairdsidh-is-niall-ann-an-eirinn/>

⁷ Eg <http://www.ampaipear.org.uk/2012/05/rita-agus-am-prionnsa/>

⁸ Eg <http://www.ampaipear.org.uk/2012/11/loriana-agus-a-cu/> or

<http://www.ampaipear.org.uk/2012/12/comhradh-sa-bhuth/>

⁹ Eg <http://www.ampaipear.org.uk/2012/11/memories-of-carinish/>

¹⁰ <http://guthan.wordpress.com>

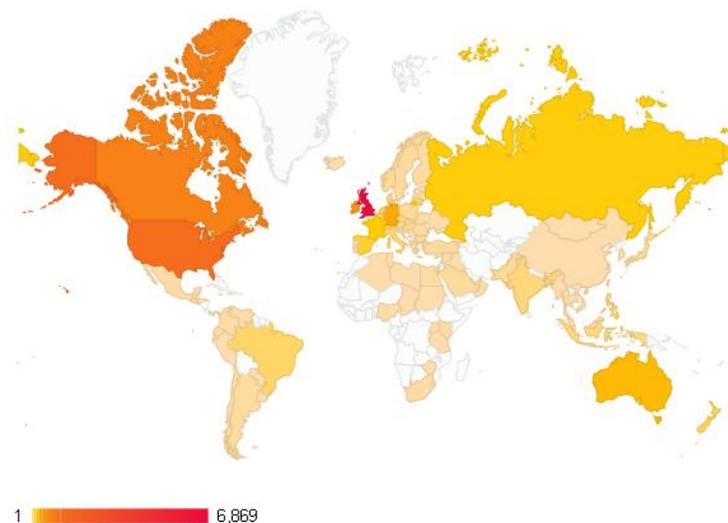
Table Two presents a worldwide geographical distribution of views amongst the top ten visiting countries. These data are only available from February 2012.

Table Two. Guthan nan Eilean Wordpress views among the top ten countries (since Feb 25, 2012)

Country	Views
United Kingdom	6869
United States	1121
Canada	794
Ireland	442
Germany	282
Australia	188
France	183
Russian Federation	171
Spain	133
New Zealand	94

Figure One presents the worldwide distribution of views from the same date in graphic format.

Figure One. Worldwide distribution of Guthan nan Eilean Wordpress views (since Feb 25, 2012)



The project’s video clips are hosted on a dedicated YouTube channel – Island Voices Videos¹¹. YouTube “analytics” enable the presentation of quantitative viewing data comparable with the

¹¹ <http://www.youtube.com/user/GordonWellsUist>

Wordpress figures. At the end of April 2013 the total figure for viewings stood at close to 70,000, divided very evenly between English and Gaelic videos.

Figure Two illustrates the steady growth of viewings since the establishment of the channel. The sudden leap in September 2012 closely coincides with the launch of a Facebook page for the project¹².

Figure Two. Island Voices Videos views by month.

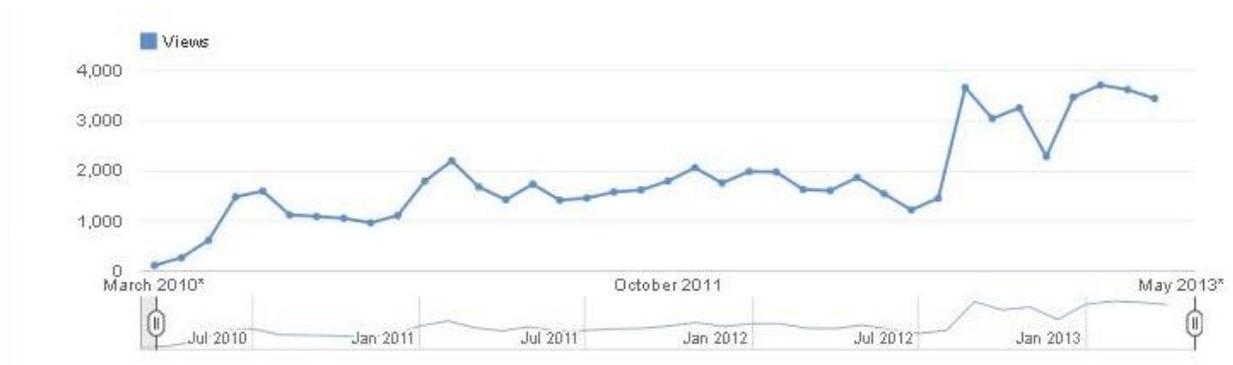


Table Three shows the top ten viewing countries (out of a total of 160) up to 1st May 2013.

Table Three. Island Voices Videos views among the top ten countries to 1st May 2013

Country	Views
United Kingdom	31945
United States	13225
Canada	4171
Ireland	2248
Australia	1883
Germany	1579
France	842
Netherlands	748
Italy	570
Spain	667

More interesting than the absolute numbers in all the statistics presented above are the trends that they show. It is clear that, over time, the frequency of viewings of both the Wordpress and YouTube platforms has increased, suggesting that online engagement with the Guthan nan Eilean project continues to grow, long after the initial stimulus of Phase One videos was placed online. The wide geographical spread of viewers also underlines how the project’s online presence enables a literally worldwide engagement, despite its tightly defined island focus.

¹² <http://www.facebook.com/GuthanVoices>

It should also be noted that the above metrics relate only to websites directly under Guthan nan Eilean project control. They give no account of the separate viewing figures that will have been generated by new blogs¹³ or online audio platforms¹⁴ that have been established as a direct result of community members engaging with Phase Two of the project, nor of the viewing traffic to the Am Pàipear Guthan/Voices page¹⁵.

2. Research Project – Questions, Contributors, Method

2.1 Research Questions

The research project was designed to focus on three specific Research Questions.

1. Which language skills are used in digital media activity, and to what extent is nonliteracy in Gaelic a barrier?
2. How do English and Gaelic skills interact in digital media production?
3. What impact do participants perceive on their own Gaelic learning and use in the community from their involvement in digital media production and publication?

These questions were developed in response to some of the key issues arising from the 2011 report, and informed also by practical experience in digital material production during Phase One and the initial stages of Phase Two in the Guthan nan Eilean project.

It was noted, for instance, in the preceding study that it is quite commonplace for fluent speakers of Gaelic to rarely, if ever, read or write in the language. The first question was intended to elicit some indication of the balance between written and spoken Gaelic that was digitally produced by participants, and to ascertain whether an inability or unwillingness to read or write Gaelic was judged to be an impediment to more active engagement.

The second question deals with the closely related issue of bilingualism, and the propensity of many fluent Gaelic speakers to rely on their English language skills when it comes to reading and writing. Given that most digital communication is mediated through a computer, this issue also relates closely to what language the computer itself is configured to use. While English is the default interface language in UK computers, there are options to use other languages, including Gaelic to some extent, thanks to the efforts of a small number of software developers working in the field of Gaelic localisation¹⁶. This project aimed to elicit participants' self-reports of any interplay between English and Gaelic in digital media production, and how it might affect any end-product in Gaelic.

¹³ Eg <http://lorianapauli.wordpress.com/>

¹⁴ Eg <http://www.ipadio.com/broadcasts/LorianaPauli>

¹⁵ <http://www.ampaipear.org.uk/guthan-voices/>

¹⁶ Eg "Goireasan Akerbeltz": <http://akerbeltz.org/index.php?title=iG%C3%A0idhlig>

Underlying both these questions is an issue identified in the earlier report. This is the question of whether the new modalities on offer in the new media might be turned to advantage in capturing the oral fluency of first language Gaelic speakers, whose skills in the language may be undervalued and overlooked in a cultural context in which higher prestige is attached to “schooled” literacy. The hope that this might be the case is certainly part of the rationale behind Guthan nan Eilean, and particularly the increased level of community engagement in its Phase Two. This research project may be considered a first step towards uncovering whether and how that hope can be realised.

The third question stands slightly apart from the first two, and delves deeper into the community context, inviting introspection on any wider impacts of individuals’ engagement with new media. An issue highlighted in the 2011 study was the question of choice of language in a bilingual community, and how it is negotiated, for example between learners and fluent speakers. With English occupying the position of unmarked “default language” between strangers, it might be the case (as in my own personal experience) that “broadcasting” one’s Gaelic skills and/or sympathies at a local community level may serve to ease the choice of the marked Gaelic option in new communicative encounters. This question was designed to explore how participants felt about any “knock-on” effects of placing their digital productions in the public domain.

2.2 Contributors

The 2011 study includes a fairly extensive description of my own personal profile as principal researcher in the project. My circumstances are largely unchanged. I am still in the position of Projects Officer for SMO, working from my home base in Benbecula, so I remain a resident member of the community in which this research project is conducted.

As part of the current study I interviewed 12 other Uist residents. Four of these – Alasdair, Angus, Flora, and Paul – also took part in the 2011 research. The selection of the other eight was opportunistic rather than random. No claim is made that the sample is “representative” of the entire Uist community. All have a known interest in Gaelic and may be considered members of the informal “community of practice” that has grown up around the Guthan nan Eilean project.

Tables Four to Seven below provide summary statistical details of the group.

Table Four. Number of contributors by Age and Gender.

Age	Female	Male	Total
Under 21	1	0	1
21-30	1	1	2
31-40	0	0	0
41-50	1	3	4
51-60	1	2	3
61-70	1	0	1
71 and over	1	0	1

Table Five. Length of Uist Residence.

Years resident	Female	Male	Total
5 or less	3	1	4
6-10	1	0	1
11-15	0	0	0
16-20	0	0	0
Over 20	0	0	0
Lifelong	2	5	7

Table Six. Education

Highest Qualification	Female	Male	Total
“Ordinary/Standard Grades	0	0	0
Highers/Advanced Highers	1	2	3
Professional Qualification/HNC/HND	1	2	3
Degree/Postgraduate	4	2	6

Table Seven. Self-assessed Gaelic Skills.

Gaelic	No (unqualified)	A little	Middling	A lot	Yes (unqualified)
Speak	0	4	0	1	7
Listen and understand	0	3	1	1	7
Write	0	5	1	1	5
Read and understand	0	2	2	3	5

The following paragraphs, using anonymised aliases, provide short “pen portraits” agreed with each individual contributor, and updated in the case of participants in the previous study.

Alasdair

Alasdair is in his fifties, and is a lifelong resident of Uist. He left school after gaining Highers. He reads and writes Gaelic, but not with the same confidence as he speaks and understands it. Over the years he has been a strong supporter of the local Gaelic fèis (summer school).

Angela

Angela has turned seventy, and has been resident in Uist nearly five years. She was a student at the local college initially, and has stayed on. Born and raised in another European country she has been multilingual from childhood, though she didn't start learning English until well into her adulthood. She has now started on Gaelic.

Angus

Angus is in his fifties, and a lifelong resident of Uist, though he has spent some years away as a student and working. He is qualified to postgraduate diploma level and is at ease in all four skills in Gaelic. He is well known as a teacher of Gaelic to adults throughout the Uists.

Flora

Flora is in her seventies. She has been resident in Uist for less than five years, but has been a regular visitor since the age of 8, having family connections here. She has an MA and an accomplished background in language teaching. She is learning Gaelic. She has a middling competence in reading and listening but is less confident in her speaking and writing skills.

Isabelle

Isabelle is in her twenties, and has been resident in Uist less than a year, having come to the local college to follow a music course. She is from a minority language community in another European country, and has "relearned" her parents' language. Her family having travelled widely, she has been bilingual in her national language and English since childhood, and has successfully studied others.

Jane

Jane is in her fifties. She has had a lifelong family connection with the islands, though only settled here in the last four years. She started studying Gaelic as a teenager, but graduated in English, and only came back to Gaelic after a long gap when she started working for a Gaelic college. She is confident in reading and writing Gaelic, and now helps other adult learners with the language.

Joan

Joan is in her forties, and is a lifelong resident of Uist. She has spoken Gaelic all her life, and makes a point of reading Gaelic columns in local papers. She enjoys reading Gaelic poetry. She has done some recording of local people in the past, and is employed in a local voluntary sector organisation dealing with social issues.

Kathleen

Kathleen is not yet twenty. She has always lived in Uist. Although not from a Gaelic-speaking home, she went through Gaelic Medium primary education and studied Gaelic to Higher level in secondary school. Currently enrolled in the local college, she is a keen musician and plays in several bands, with a focus on Scottish traditional music.

Lachlan

Lachlan is a lifelong island resident in his fifties. He is a fluent Gaelic speaker, who rarely if ever wrote or read Gaelic after leaving school, until getting involved in a local Gaelic drama group four years ago. He is a comfortable speaker of the language, and has been a regular “vox pop” contributor to Gaelic radio programmes.

Malcolm

Malcolm is in his forties, and grew up with Gaelic-speaking parents on Uist. He started school “not speaking English”, and left “not speaking Gaelic”. Subsequently he undertook Gaelic media training and worked for several years in Gaelic broadcasting before returning to Uist to work in a local community development group.

Paul

Paul is in his forties, and arrived in Uist less than five years ago. He is keen to learn Gaelic and has attended local classes, but so far considers himself to be still at the beginning stage. He has a professional qualification from another European country. Having worked in a local shop for some time he now has office-based employment.

Peter

Peter is in his twenties, and was raised on Uist in a Gaelic-speaking family, going through Gaelic Medium primary education and taking the language to Higher level in secondary school. Following graduation with a degree in English from a mainland university he found work in Gaelic broadcasting for a number of years, before taking employment with a local community newspaper in Uist.

It can be seen that the group contains a mixture of incomers and lifelong residents, with wide-ranging skills and experience with Gaelic. Some are learners and some are teachers, while others are simply “users”, and some actually have professional media experience.

2.3 Method

The method followed in this study mirrored that of the 2011 study very closely. All participants took part in a semi-structured interview, which provided the bulk of the data reported here. Each participant was invited to check a summary of the information they provided, and it was also

made clear that they were welcome to volunteer further thoughts at any stage up until the compilation of this report. Again, as with the previous study, the publication of this report, which will be shared with all participants and more widely in the community, is preferably viewed as a stage in an ongoing and dynamic process of community-wide deliberation, hopefully leading to further developments and new ideas, rather than a definitive statement on an unchanging and unchangeable state of affairs. Further detail on data gathering and analysis is given in the Appendix.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Research Question 1: Which language skills are used in digital media activity, and to what extent is nonliteracy in Gaelic a barrier?

Table Eight below sketches out in schematic form a broad picture of the range of digital communicative activity across the group as a whole. Clearly, when it comes to Gaelic activity there is a preponderance of spoken over written production. This comes as small surprise, given the known reluctance or inability of many fluent speakers to read or write in the language, as reflected again in the figures for self-assessment of skills in Table Seven above. So, it can be taken as a given that this “nonliteracy” in Gaelic impedes the production of written Gaelic in commonly used digital communication media and platforms such as e-mail or Facebook. This is not to say that it doesn’t happen at all. More than half the group reported writing in Gaelic from time to time, though in some instances this might be very rarely.

However, this question addresses “multimodality” – the capacity to channel language in a variety of ways, for example through audio or video recordings as well as the written word. The very fact that the project participants had been able to produce spoken Gaelic in these media shows that, to the extent that nonliteracy presented any kind of obstacle, they had been able to overcome it. Lachlan expresses his awareness of the distinction between language competence and literacy skills very clearly:

Nuair a bha mise san sgoil bha mi a’ faighinn 90 percent sa Ghàidhlig.
Sgrìobhainn i agus leughainn i. ’S dh’fhàg mi an sgoil, agus mus deach mi air ais chun an dràma ceithir bliadhna air ais ’s gann a sgrìobhainn i agus ’s gann a leughainn i.... Cha do leugh mi leabhar no litir Gàidhlig bhon dh’fhàg mi an sgoil. Cha do chaill mi a’ Ghàidhlig ge-tà, dìreach an leughadh agus an speilgeadh.

(When I was at school I would get 90 percent in Gaelic. I would write it and read it. I left school, and before I went back to the drama four years ago I would rarely write or read it... I didn’t read a Gaelic book or letter after leaving school. I didn’t lose Gaelic, however, just the reading and the spelling.)

Table Eight. Summary scheme of responses to RQ1.

Contributor	Communicative activity through new, social and broadcast media, including Guthan nan Eilean (GnE)
Alasdair	E-mails in English, sometimes in Gaelic (re Fèis), sometimes bilingually. Largely passive follower of Facebook (mostly English) Occasional radio interviews in Gaelic. Audio contributor to Phase Two GnE/Am Pàipear (Gaelic). Previous participant in Phase One GnE Videos (English and Gaelic).
Angus	Has blogged using Blogger, and produced audio podcasts on Ipadio in Gaelic. E-mails in English and Gaelic (the latter mainly to learners and those professionally involved in Gaelic). Regular user of Skype to speak with widely scattered Gaelic learners. Audio and video contributor to Phase Two GnE/Am Pàipear (Gaelic). Previous participant in Phase One GnE Videos (English and Gaelic).
Angela	Blogs with Wordpress in English, and produced audio podcasts on Ipadio in English and Gaelic. Multilingual Facebook and e-mail user. Audio contributor to Phase Two GnE/Am Pàipear (English and Gaelic).
Flora	E-mails in Gaelic to tutor. Audio and video contributor to Phase Two GnE/Am Pàipear (English and Gaelic). Largely passive follower of Facebook (English).
Isabelle	Multilingual Facebook and e-mail user. Audio contributor to Phase Two GnE/Am Pàipear (multilingual, including some Gaelic).
Jane	E-mails comfortably in English and Gaelic. Occasional radio interviews in Gaelic. Audio contributor to Phase Two GnE (English and Gaelic) Facilitated Gaelic learner contributions to Phase Two GnE/Am Pàipear (text and audio)
Joan	Occasional radio interviews in Gaelic. Audio contributor to Phase Two GnE/Am Pàipear (Gaelic and English) – as interviewee and interviewer. Facebook and e-mail user in English.
Kathleen	Audio contributor to Phase Two GnE/Am Pàipear (English and Gaelic). Active on Facebook and Twitter, mostly in English with occasional Gaelic words or phrases.
Lachlan	Occasional radio interviews in Gaelic. Audio contributor to Phase Two GnE/Am Pàipear (Gaelic). Facebook and e-mail user in English.
Malcolm	Professional Gaelic broadcasting experience (radio and television). Closely involved in developing local community radio (Gaelic and English). Audio and video contributor to Phase Two GnE/Am Pàipear (Gaelic and English). Facebook and e-mail user, mostly in English.
Paul	Text and audio contributor to Phase Two GnE/Am Pàipear (English and Gaelic). Runs a multilingual website (including English and some Gaelic). Multilingual user of e-mail.
Peter	Professional Gaelic broadcasting experience (radio and television). Edits and writes for local community newspaper (English and Gaelic) in print and online. Facebook and e-mail user, mostly in English.

The relative status attached to written and spoken language was discussed at some length in the 2011 study. Peter, with his responsibility for producing a regular community newspaper, has a professional's awareness of, and clear commitment to, the written word. Nevertheless, he was able to take a balanced view of how audio clips could enhance the paper's online presence, and drew on his professional broadcasting experience to emphasise that he sees special value in the spoken word:

I know from my radio background that sound is very engaging.

This awareness had led him to put plans in place to include more audio on the paper's website and Facebook page.

Both Angus and Angela had experimented with audio blogging through the Ipadio platform¹⁷, which enables the creation of online soundfiles, but reported differing degrees of success. While Angela had succeeded in recording a series of clips and publishing them on her blog, including significant Gaelic content despite her still faltering control of the language, Angus did not take readily to some of the technical requirements of Web 2.0 platforms.

Tha rudan beaga eile cuideachd – passwords is rudan mar sin – tha mise buailteach a bhith a' call rudan mar sin.

(There are other small things too – passwords and things like that – I'm liable to lose things like that.)

So, while nonliteracy in Gaelic need not be a barrier, there may nonetheless be other technical obstacles that can thwart successful production of digital audio material. Nevertheless, with or without literacy, the potential evidently exists to produce spoken Gaelic in digital formats, either "captured" or, indeed, live speech using Skype. Participants in Guthan nan Eilean and this associated research project have demonstrated the capacity to do it, and an awareness of the extra dimension that it can bring to the communicative exchange between creator and audience.

3.2 Research Question 2: How do English and Gaelic skills interact in digital media production?

Table Nine below summarises participants' responses to the question of how Gaelic and English skills interact in the creation of Gaelic digital content. Clearly the process is a bilingual one, as in all cases where a computer is involved the technical interaction is through English, though a significant minority, notably among younger individuals, expressed an interest in exploring the use of a Gaelic interface. Isabelle, for example, had used a Spanish interface for a while when learning that language, and could see the point of doing the same with Gaelic:

If there was a button that could change the English into Gaelic I probably would have done that.... You would be seeing it. It would be more in your mind.

¹⁷ <http://www.ipadio.com/>

Table Nine. Summary scheme of responses to RQ2.

Contributor	English-Gaelic interaction in content production
Alasdair	Uses English interface on computer for production of both English and Gaelic texts.
Angus	Uses English interface on computer for production of both English and Gaelic texts. “Nì mi sràcan sa Ghàidhlig. Sin e.” (I do Gaelic grave accents. That’s it.)
Angela	Uses English interface on computer. Switches to German or Italian keyboard settings to write in those languages. Wrote out Gaelic script longhand for audio monologue. Put questions in English for responses in Gaelic by interviewee.
Flora	Uses English interface on computer. Set up video interviews by phone, using mixture of English and some Gaelic.
Isabelle	Uses English interface on computer (though switched to Spanish for a while when learning that language). Would consider using Gaelic interface to help learning.
Jane	Uses English interface on computer for production of both English and Gaelic texts. Writes Gaelic first when producing text for both languages.
Joan	Uses English interface on computer. Set up Gaelic interview verbally.
Kathleen	Uses English interface on computer. Would consider Gaelic interface. “Quite cool”.
Lachlan	Uses English interface on computer.
Malcolm	Has never used a Gaelic interface on computer. Would like to in principle. “It’s all about time.”
Paul	Uses English interface on computer for all languages, “occasionally inconvenient for my first language”.
Peter	Supportive of Gaelic interface in principle. In practice uses English. Had used Irish interface with previous Gaelic language employer.

Both Malcolm and Peter, the two participants with professional Gaelic broadcasting experience, expressed sympathy with the notion of using a Gaelic interface, even if only as an act of solidarity with the Gaelic revitalisation movement. However, they referred to practical considerations to explain their own habitual use of English, citing availability of software and the implications of networking computers in the workplace, among other things. Both were also open about their difficulties with written Gaelic in comparison with their English, and Malcolm was quite frank about the implications of that in a pressurised working environment:

It’s all about time, and my scanning something in English is much quicker.

Jane had also had experience of a Gaelic working environment, but had chosen not to use such Gaelic interfaces as were available, seeing no great advantage in doing so. As a successful learner, with a high degree of confidence in her conscious knowledge of, and control over, Gaelic grammar and spelling conventions, she saw no reason to believe that using an English interface with the computer impeded her Gaelic production.

She did make the point, however, that when writing a piece in both languages she would compose it first in her weaker language, Gaelic:

Then I'm writing the Gaelic at the level I can write it at, rather than writing it in English and then struggling to translate.

The 2011 study highlighted the issue of community-level bilingualism, and the communicative mismatches that can arise as a result of fluent Gaelic speakers' propensity to naturally use their full linguistic repertoire – which includes English – whereas Gaelic learners in search of an immersion experience might prefer to operate in a tightly restricted monolingual environment to suit their learning purpose. A reflection of this same dichotomy may be seen in relation to the production of digital content. While Gaelic learners may want to maximise their exposure to, and use of, the language at every opportunity, even to the point, for example, of altering default computer settings where possible from English to Gaelic, the issue can be of less concern to fluent Gaelic speakers (or confident Gaelic writers) who see no inherent conflict in operating bilingually in a digital environment to produce spoken or written Gaelic content.

3.3 Research Question 3: What impact do participants perceive on their own Gaelic learning and use in the community from their involvement in digital media production and publication?

Responses to this more open-ended question do not lend themselves to display in a tabular format similar to those for the first two questions. However, in terms of overall balance across the group it was clear that positive reactions in the community were a source of encouragement to a large majority of participants, with only one reporting a complete absence of reaction to their public output.

Peter's experience, as a known face in the Gaelic broadcasting world, perhaps encapsulates in the clearest form the potential benefits of placing one's output in the public domain:

There's an unfortunate general perception with older people that it's a waste of time going up to a young person and trying to speak in Gaelic... It wasn't until I had this general recognition from speaking on television that they actually approach you like that... It gives me a boost, because it's helpful in developing your skills and confidence in speaking the language.

Angela, an early stages Gaelic learner, while expressing some diffidence about possibly displaying an overly brash attitude, reported that she had received compliments, both verbally and on Facebook, on her first attempt at speaking Gaelic online. She also noted some possibly immediate effects:

Two people here talked to me in Gaelic this week, which normally they don't. So I thought maybe they have seen it.

Participants also took encouragement from hearing other group members' output, with learners validating each others' efforts and using them as a spur to further creative work on their own part. Paul described his reaction to another learner's piece:

It made me feel quite good. It gave me some feeling of success. It made me think, “Oh, there’s something I can understand”. It was very basic Gaelic.

On the other hand, a small number of participants did find the use of their own recorded voice somewhat disturbing or stressful, and while generally pleased to be able to make a contribution to the overall community project did not particularly enjoy this part of the experience. Flora reflected on whether she had been over-ambitious in electing to make video rather than audio recordings. Although she had received positive feedback about the recordings, she herself had not sought comments, feeling some dissatisfaction with her own part in the process:

The video put me off big time and I got very stressed.... I didn’t seem very relaxed, and my dream is to do it in a relaxed way... I think I need to be less self-conscious, because it is eliciting such lovely Gaelic (from interviewees)... I suppose I was trying to do something a bit advanced there.

Given that the study group consists entirely of people who already have a relatively high degree of enthusiasm for the language, any expressions of frustration or dissatisfaction with the processes involved in Gaelic digital content creation need to be given full consideration. It is quite likely that problems of this nature will loom at least as large, if not larger still, in the wider Gaelic-speaking (or Gaelic-learning) population. From that point of view, the hope and enthusiasm with which the Guthan nan Eilean project has embraced the concept of User Generated Content as a means of capturing spoken Gaelic, and in so doing integrating fluent Gaelic speakers more effectively in the wider Gaelic development movement, need to be tempered with a realistic assessment of the practicalities and sensitivities involved. A potential reluctance to self-record was certainly among the other issues participants themselves raised in discussion, and is treated further in the following section. Overall, however, responses to this question give grounds to suggest that community members’ production of digital content, when placed in the public domain, has the potential to give rise to positive feedback which encourages in turn further content creation in a self-perpetuating virtuous circle, with observable spin-off benefits for more generalised use of Gaelic in a community setting.

3.4 Local and Other Issues

The field of digital literacies is relatively new, multi-faceted, and constantly evolving. So attempts to “tie down” a particular topic within the field present particular challenges, not least because digital literacies practices themselves are changing all the time as new platforms and technical innovations keep appearing. Bhatt 2012 is just one example of an early career researcher uncovering how digital literacies as a social practice are liable to circumvent or subvert slow-moving institutional structures and strictures. An awareness of the wide and unpredictable range of directions in which digital literacy practice can be taken informed the reasoning behind the open-ended and non-directive nature of Phase Two of the Guthan nan Eilean project, which is also reflected in the structure of this research project.

While the coverage above of the three agreed research questions may constitute in some minimal sense a completion of the study's terms of reference, it was considered crucial from the outset that space should be made for participants to raise their own concerns and questions in response, as part of the process of ongoing dialogue between the project and the local community within which it is sited. This section on "local and other issues" should therefore properly be considered as an integral part of the study, particularly insofar as it may contain commentary on, or pointers towards, further developments in that community.

To begin with, though it risks sounding self-congratulatory, it would be a major omission not to report on the many positive comments participants made about their engagement with the Guthan nan Eilean project and its innovative multimodal approach to language development. Here are some examples:

'S e project math math a tha seo, agus tha e a' toirt cothrom a bhith a' cluinntinn Gàidhlig nan coimhearsnachdan a tha seo agus ga cumail beò. Tha mi a' creidsinn gun e rud cudromach a tha sin fhèin. (*Joan*)

(This is a really good project, and it gives an opportunity to hear the Gaelic of these communities and keep it alive. I believe that itself is an important thing.)

It was all very well when collectors were going round, but all the material ended up being locked in Edinburgh. And it's only just now, years and years later that it's starting to trickle out, whereas something like this (Guthan nan Eilean) is going to be available from the start to everybody. (*Alasdair*)

I would say it improved my self-esteem. That's even beyond the language skills... It gave me a boost, even after I finished. (*Paul*)

I think this project is much much much more than just the language, because... through these interviews, and the people I can listen to on the Am Pàipear page or Island Voices, it's really like the island comes alive much more. I have a picture of a tapestry which is almost every week there is something new... So you create also a community in a way with this project – apart from education and language. I just see how beautiful it is. That's why I'm so enthusiastic about it and want to do more. (*Angela*)

It's encouraging to note from the comments above that participants have experienced positive impacts from the project at a range of levels. Joan and Alasdair, as fluent speakers and lifelong residents, appreciated the local focus and ease of access to Gaelic as it is spoken in Uist. At the same time Paul and Angela, as Gaelic learners and recently arrived incomers, also experienced the benefits of participation in terms of personal involvement and achievement, or even in an aesthetic sense.

Despite the many positive aspects of the Guthan nan Eilean project and its encouragement of digital literacy activity in the community, however, several participants did wish to raise specific concerns. Unsurprisingly, given the emphasis in the project on multimodality, those participants who were not able to readily access good Internet connectivity because of their home location were keen to stress the need for truly community-wide broadband, so that audio or video material could be confidently created and received anywhere in the islands. Although the responsibility and capacity to improve the islands' communication infrastructure lie far outwith the remit of Guthan nan Eilean, it would clearly be of immense benefit to the project, and its community-centred orientation, if all suggestions of a digital divide between different geographical areas within the islands could be satisfactorily resolved.

Another topic raised by several participants, already referred to in 3.3 above, was the question of how to overcome personal inhibitions about recording one's own voice. Clearly, it is an issue of some significance, given the number of times it was mentioned. No doubt, just as some people dislike having their photograph taken and would never put a picture of themselves on Facebook, for some people the notion of being recorded and their voice being played back on the Internet will always be one step too far. However, it was encouraging to note how many participants who had initially experienced similar misgivings were able to overcome them, and willing to offer testimony on how or why they had done so.

Cha toil leam a bhith a' cluinntinn mo ghuth fhèin, idir idir. Ach tha mi a' smuaintinn gun cuir mi suas leis ma tha mi a' faicinn gu bheil sinn a' dol a dh'fhaighinn stòraidhean dhaoine – gu bheil sin nas cudromaiche – a bhith a' cluinnteil daoine eile. (*Joan*)

(I don't like to hear my own voice, at all. But I think I'll put up with it if I can see that we're going to get people's stories – that that is more important – to hear other people.)

Chan eil mise uabhasach keen air an guth agam fhèin a chluinntinn nas mòtha air a' wireless no càil mar sin, ach dh'fhàsadh iad eòlach air, tha mi a' creidsinn... Chanainn riutha a dhèanamh, ma tha sinn airson Gàidhlig a chumail beò as dèidh an generation againne... (*Lachlan*)

(I'm not very keen on hearing my own voice either on the radio or anything like that, but they'd get used to it, I believe... I'd say to them to do it, if we want to keep Gaelic alive after our own generation...)

Without minimising the issue for those for whom it is a major concern, these quotes offer some reassurance that this potential obstacle need not be insurmountable. It may be hoped that as the practice becomes more and more commonplace through the example of Guthan nan Eilean and other local online audio outlets, such as Am Pàipear or the new community radio station, more people may be encouraged by neighbourly example to try it for themselves.

That said, it is also the case that digital literacy covers a very wide spectrum of activities, and that different individuals will choose to operate successfully in different sectors within that spread. Social media offer another example. While nine out of the twelve participants reported using Facebook, two were quite resolute in their opposition to any involvement in it, viewing it as an unacceptable threat to privacy, and a third quite uninterested. All three, however, were nevertheless key participants in, and contributors to, the overall Guthan nan Eilean project.

Finally, and reinforcing the point about the various directions that content development can take, a number of individuals spoke of how they felt that digital literacy activity originating in the Guthan nan Eilean project could support various other community interests, groups, or projects. Local community media groups (newspaper and radio) have already been mentioned as users, or potential users, either of content already produced in Guthan nan Eilean or of content yet to be produced by ever more experienced participants in the project. Another participant has always had her eye on using the material she creates for use in ceilidh-style poetry and drama community events involving local primary schools. Reminiscence work with older and socially isolated community members is an avenue that another participant is exploring, while a couple of others are involved with local history projects, and can see the benefits of enhancing that work with audio recordings.

This is a highly disparate list of community activities, which will no doubt grow further in response to needs and opportunities that are hard, if not impossible, to predict. They will, however, retain the common link of having been identified by individual community members or groups who are alive to the new affordances offered through new, and constantly developing, digital literacies.

4. Conclusion

This final section is kept brief, as in many respects the preceding section, 3.4, outlining project participants' own additional responses to the research process constitutes the real substantive basis for any proposals for further action.

It is to be hoped that the information collected presents sufficient evidence to justify continuation of the kind of project work described here. In particular, the development of a multimodal approach to Gaelic language capture and curation, as exemplified by Phase Two of Guthan nan Eilean, appears to offer a model worthy of further development that will support oral work, especially among nonliterate fluent speakers, but with clear resultant benefits for the wider Gaelic-speaking and Gaelic-learning constituency. The model seems to work and has been well received. While it might be a desirable goal for all Gaelic speakers to be equally comfortable readers and writers of the language, there seems to be little point in waiting for an adult training programme to deliver such an outcome (and with no guarantee of community-wide uptake, or anything like it, even with the availability of such a programme), when oral work can be

developed and expanded right now, and before the community loses yet more of its most accomplished Gaelic speakers.

As with the 2011 study, the next stage for this report is to present it in appropriate local community fora for further discussion. Out of this cycle of community involvement and consultation it is anticipated that a new iteration of continued project development will emerge, appropriately complemented by an informed applied linguistic research perspective. The local focus is absolutely key to ensuring that any further developments are firmly grounded in, and meaningful to, this Gaelic-speaking community. That said, the global reach that locally generated digital content production has already attained, as shown through the bilingual Guthan nan Eilean project, may well point to the development of further projects and research partnerships across languages on regional, national, or international levels. SMO has already begun this work through collaboration with partners in Ireland¹⁸ and on mainland Europe¹⁹, building on the Guthan nan Eilean experience, which may be viewed as some kind of model for other languages and communities. Given a generalised concern over the urgent plight of many endangered languages worldwide and, at the same time, the rapidly developing interest in ever-evolving digital literacies, it may well be that equally worthwhile and innovative research and development partnerships could be developed beyond European borders.

Further Reading

iGàidhlig

This Akerbeltz site provides a summary of, and links to, Gaelic software tools and technologies:

<http://akerbeltz.org/index.php?title=iG%C3%A0idhlig>

OpenLearn LabSpace: Language and Literacy in a Changing World

This unit is part of the Open University's Open Educational Resources. It "explores the rapidly changing field of language and literacy studies and its relevance to teaching and learning":

<http://labspace.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=445539>

Reflect for ESOL

This site provides further information on the Reflect for ESOL movement's approach to language and literacy development, and its background philosophy: <http://www.reflect-action.org/reflectesol>

¹⁸ Eg <http://guthan.wordpress.com/2013/05/03/trilingual-trip/>

¹⁹ Eg <http://guthan.wordpress.com/2012/04/23/lithuanian-linkage/>

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Appendix – Data Gathering and Analysis

As noted in Section 2.3, the same method was followed as was used in the preceding research project. This description from Wells 2011 (pp 13-14) serves equally well for the present study.

The interview structure was flexibly based on a proforma questionnaire and the Research Question list. The primary function of the questionnaire was to collect the basic statistical information collated in the tables above. As part of the UHI ethical procedures process, contributors were also given an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, and offered a choice of English, Gaelic, or a combination of both languages in which to conduct the interview. All participants readily agreed to the interview being recorded. As interviewer, I explained that there were three main questions that I wished to address during the course of the interview, but that I was keen that the conversation should be free enough to allow interviewees to express themselves in their own terms on both these issues and any others which they felt had a bearing on the research topic. As an ice-breaker, and before addressing any of the research questions, I therefore made a point of inviting interviewees to first say a little about themselves in general and about their use of, or involvement with, Gaelic in their daily life.

Interviews varied in length between 20 and 45 minutes, and finished with me verbally summarizing the main points I had taken from the conversation. I then listened again to the recording at the earliest opportunity, and took close notes of what the interviewee said, paying particular attention to issues relating to the three Research Questions but also noting any other points the interviewee highlighted as important. I did not create a full verbatim transcript of each recorded interview, but did transcribe substantial parts of some interviews where I thought use of the interviewee's own words may prove valuable in subsequent reporting and analysis.

I produced a concise written summary of each interviewee's main points which I then fed back to them electronically for confirmation of accuracy. In this second stage I also invited participants to reflect on the points we had discussed and to get back to me if they wished to clarify anything they had said or to add any further thoughts.

It should be stressed that, while the interviews provided the bulk of the data reported here, the fact that I am also a member of this community, and liable to meet and converse with any and all of the other contributors on a regular basis, means that there is a process of ongoing dialogue also involved, particularly in light of my support role in Guthan nan Eilean. So, in presenting the disparate findings in the present study I have not confined myself solely to reporting on the information divulged in the interviews alone.

This research philosophy is also encapsulated in Wells 2011 (p 14).

This is not a "detached" study in which the interviewees are treated as objects or subjects of research. Rather, they and I are all community participants in a disciplined co-operative study, with myself occupying a specialized reporting and analytic role. This means that my interaction with other contributors is not based on, or restricted to, one free-standing interview per interviewee. It is situated within a more dynamic process of collaboration. The purpose of the study is not to present a statistical report based on broad-based survey work. Rather, through a process of dialogue within the community it is hoped to provide more of an in-depth picture at this point in time of some of the key underlying dynamics in a constantly evolving social and linguistic process. It also follows that a version of this report needs to be made readily available for all contributors to it, and to any other interested community members, hopefully informing new phases in local Gaelic development, and perhaps on a wider stage too.