**Introduction**

Over the past few years, as part of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) reform on the one hand, and the increased demands for school accountability on the other, more and more schools have launched a school website aimed at enhancing educational activities, supporting student-teacher communication, contributing to school marketing efforts, and fostering accountability to and collaboration with the school’s constituency (Hesketh & Selwyn, 1999; Maddux & Johnson, 2006; Miodusar, Nachmias, Tubin, & Forkosh-Baruch, 2003).

A large body of research on ICT-based pedagogical and educational websites (i.e., websites that focus on subject matters and learning activities) reveals the contributions of such websites to the schooling process (Kozma, 2003; Miodusar, Nachmias, Lahav, & Oren, 2000; Pelgrum & Anderson, 2001; Plomp, Anderson, Law, & Quale, 2003).

However, the phenomenon of school websites, which serve the school organization in its entirety, remains relatively unexplored. Buzzwords like “E-learning,” “E-teaching,” and “E-schooling” have become very popular but provide no help in generating a deeper understanding of school website contents, structure, and functions. The vagueness of school website goals is also evidenced in the metaphors used to refer to them in the educational literature: a window for the school’s culture (Giladi, 2004); a virtual display window (Klein, 2005); like Hollywood movie sets with large graphics but not much solid content (McKenzie, 1997); or a tool through which schools seek to reaffirm or reconstruct their institutional identities (Hesketh & Selwyn, 1999). All these metaphors indicate the power of the potential messages school websites can convey to casual and intentional visitors, but what is actually happening on school websites? The present study aims to start answering this question by exploring the contents and structure of school websites and their responsiveness to their school’s environment.

In the following sections we briefly review the literature regarding school websites, describe the institutional theory that provides the conceptual framework for the study, present the study methods and findings, and finally discuss the results and suggest practical implications for accountability-oriented school website development.

**Literature review**

Schools’ access to the Internet has increased dramatically over recent years. In the USA for example, the proportion of instructional rooms with access to the Internet increased from 51% in 1998 to 93% in 2003 (NCES, 2005). It follows that there may be a corresponding proliferation of school websites as well. A school website, like any other Internet site, is constructed of multiple interlocking pages, each presenting different content.

The site’s design and structure depend on several aspects, such as the content layout (linear, branching, or web-like structure), modes of information presentation (e.g., text, still image, dynamic image, interactive image, sound, and video), navigation tools (e.g., thematic indexes, image maps, time-lines, iconic directional-pointers, search facilities) (Shemla & Nachmias, 2007), and human resources (e.g., both technical knowledge and understanding of the school’s culture and educational priorities) (Tubin & Chen, 2002).

Looking for architectural criteria for website evaluation, Hong and Kim (2004) suggested three main principles—structural robustness, functional utility, and aesthetic appeal—that impact user satisfaction and loyalty. Other researchers found that website quality depends on the richness of the contents (Leping & Johnson, 2005), the website’s usefulness and ease of use (Selim, 2003), and the user’s goals and activity levels (Hong & Kim, 2004). The quality of a school website also depends on the degree to which it fulfills the school’s needs. McKenzie (1997), for example, proposed four goals for a good school website: introduction to the school, interface to outside resources, publishing of good works, and serving as a resource database. Others believe that a school site should mainly serve as an extension of the school, offering a learning environment that enhances individualization of teaching and learning, and improving teacher-student communication (Cumming, Bonk, & Jacobs, 2002).

Another important goal for the website is to prop up the school’s high positioning and image, both for accountability and marketing purposes, especially in a decentralized and competitive environment where demands for accountability and parental choice become an important factor in the school’s survival (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004; Bush, 1999; Marks & Nance, 2007).

Theoretical justification for the diverse goals and users of school websites is provided by institutional theory. Institutional Theory Institutional theory suggests that institutional arrangements play a key role in shaping organizational behavior (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). According to this theory many of the organization’s activities, which purportTubin Klein 192 Planning and Changing edly promote efficiency, are actually conducted to achieve environmental legitimacy. By adopting the institutional regulations, norms, and ideology from the surrounding environment, the organization increases environmental support and resource flow, and enhances its survival prospects. Sometimes this occurs at the price of undermining the organization’s technical core—its processes of transforming inputs into outputs and efficiently accomplishing the goals that the organization was established to achieve in the first place (Meyer & Rowan, 1992; Scott, 2003).

**Summary**

We explored school website contents, structure, and responsiveness and came up with several important conclusions. First, we found that the symbolic and technical factors are both more evident in secular school websites than they are in religious school websites. This can be explained by the more demanding and competitive environment of the secular schools than the more unified and closed environment of the religious schools (Benavot & Resh, 2001).

The clear message from the environment can also explain the fact that only the technical factor was found to be significantly different in elementary and secondary school websites. While the emphasis on the symbolic factor is similar across levels, probably due to the same Israeli culture that both have to adopt, the technical factor is more evident in the secondary schools, which prepare their students for the matriculation exams, and thus use the websites for more technical subjects than the elementary schools do. Second, we found that the websites comprise a variety of contents, different combinations of categories, and diverse degrees of development. Several explanations can elucidate this finding. First, it could be that the websites are in their formative stage (in most cases we were unable to find the websites’ date of establishment), and their underdeveloped status reflects this. If so, further longitudinal study might find improvement over time.

Second, the diversity might be explained by the unequal resources that schools have to invest in website development. This explanation is supported by finding the more developed websites on the more costly independent platform. However, there are some well-developed websites in the small elementary schools. Further study is called for to find which factors affect the development of a school website. Third, different emphasis on the technical or symbolic contents of the websites might result from school policy, with different schools variously using the website to claim an advantage in one, two, or all areas: as a marketing tool, communication channel, and/or for the learning environment. This is also a subject for further study to find under what circumstances the school website emphasizes any aspect of all the above. Finally, we found that most of the schools were not fully exploiting the website as a tool for boosting accountability or enhancing marketing options. The empty pages, outdated sections, and sporadic use of images all support this impression. Although these indicators were more frequent in websites using the off-the-shelf platform. In the following section we suggest some implications in this direction.

**Implications for Strategic School Website Development**

Integrate the website as part of the strategic plan. Integrating the school website as part of the marketing mix into the school’s strategic plan (David & Ellison, 1997) will increase the school’s capability for positioning itself, provide better control of ‘word of mouth’ communication, and build a solid reputation

Enhance website responsiveness to the school environment. To enhance website responsiveness we suggest presenting mainly the symbolic categories in the open section of the school websites, where username and password are not required. For presenting accountability and gaining environmental legitimacy and the resources that follow, the school has to present its achievements (Meyer & Rowan, 1992). Thus, sections like goal attainment, innovative and unique programs, information for parents, declarations regarding school goals and missions, and information on excellence, prizes, and social events are a necessity. The main idea is to show that the school is a good place to learn and that it follows environmental expectations.

Nurture the interactive and cooperative character of the website. The school website can be used as a channel of communication for reaching different groups of clients, like parents and prospective students. This means opening discussion groups, preparing a section for parents’ input before and responses after open evenings and parent assemblies, establishing a talk-back section, downloading an FAQs

Recognize website limitations. There are also limitations involved in using a website. First, it needs a webmaster to run it. The webmaster’s job is to update contents, respond to questions, and troubleshoot. Without this, the website quickly becomes a Hollywood set (McKenzie, 1997), which impairs accountability efforts. Second, the website needs content contributors. This means constantly gathering relevant and attractive information, otherwise the number of those among the school website visitors seeking information will be reduced.

**Conclusion**

Some of the websites were found to be very well-developed, which indicates greater emphasis on school culture and priorities than the pure technology issue. In an educational environment that is shifting from supply-led systems—operating in accordance with procedures decided by educational authorities, schools, Designing a School Website and teachers—toward systems that are far more sensitive to parent and community demands (OECD, 2006), it is a waste of a great opportunity not to integrate the website into the school’s strategic plan.

A school site should mainly serve as an extension of the school, offering a learning environment that enhances individualization of teaching and learning, and improving teacher-student communication (Cumming, Bonk, & Jacobs, 2002). Another important goal for the website is to prop up the school’s high positioning and image, both for accountability and marketing purposes, especially in a decentralized and competitive environment where demands for accountability and parental choice become an important factor in the school’s survival

**References**

Dorit Tubin

Sarit Klein

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