



***** IAU0910: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE 23 APRIL 2009 12:00 CEST *****

www.iau.org/public_press/news/release/iau0910/

The Portal to the Universe opens its doors

23 April 2009, Paris: Keeping up-to-date with cutting-edge astronomy and space science breakthroughs has just become that much easier, thanks to the Portal to the Universe, the latest Cornerstone project of the International Year of Astronomy 2009 (IYA2009). As a high-tech website embracing Web 2.0 technologies, the Portal to the Universe aims to become a one-stop-shop for astronomy news.

Released during the European Week of Astronomy and Space Science (JENAM 2009), taking place this week at the University of Hertfordshire, UK, the Portal to the Universe website has been eagerly anticipated by journalists, science communicators, scientists, educators and members of the general public alike. The Portal to the Universe provides a global portal for online astronomy content, serving as an index and aggregator.

The site itself features news, blogs, video podcasts, audio podcasts, images, videos and more. Web 2.0 collaborative tools, such as the ranking of different services according to popularity, help the user to sift constructively through the wealth of information available and will promote interactions within the astronomy multimedia community. A range of “widgets” (small applications) have also been developed to tap into all sorts of existing “live data”, such as near-live pictures of the Sun, live positions of spacecraft or live observations from telescopes.

Project Manager Lars Lindberg Christensen says: *“It is clear that even in such a well-defined field as astronomy, there is much more ‘information confusion’ than you might think. There is a real need in the community for this kind of site, where astronomy content is gathered in one place and is easily accessible. The International Year of Astronomy 2009 seeks to bring the Universe down to Earth, and this Portal is an excellent way of achieving this. This website will provide a single entry point to stars and galaxies”.*

The vision for the Portal is to enable real-time access to content by aggregating (pulling) from providers of dynamic content like blogs, images, news, etc. and distributing (pushing) to users, as well as indexing and archiving, collecting and maintaining a central repository of useful information.

Modern technology such as RSS feeds and standardised metadata make it possible to tie all the suppliers of astronomy information together with a single, semi-automatically updating portal. The result is a technologically advanced site that brings together strands of astronomy content from across the worldwide web.

Lead developer, Lars Holm Nielsen, says, *“It has been a bit of a stretch to ensure that everything goes online just minutes after it has been released. We encourage everyone to participate and to submit RSS feeds for relevant news, images, videos, podcasts etc. to help make the Portal more complete.”*

Lars Lindberg Christensen says: *"Today's release is just the beginning. The project will develop with, and around, the community's needs and lots of new features are planned, including adding resources such as educational materials, addresses for all astronomy stakeholders such as amateur clubs, planetariums and observatories."*

The Portal to the Universe can be accessed at <http://www.portaltotheuniverse.org/>

Links

- Portal to the Universe website: <http://www.portaltotheuniverse.org/>
- IYA2009 website: <http://www.astronomy2009.org/>

Notes

The vision of the IYA2009 is to help the citizens of the world rediscover their place in the Universe through the day and night-time skies the impact of astronomy and basic sciences on our daily lives, and understand better how scientific knowledge can contribute to a more equitable and peaceful society.

The aim of the IYA2009 is to stimulate worldwide interest, especially among young people, in astronomy and science under the central theme, "The Universe, Yours to Discover". IYA2009 events and activities will promote a greater appreciation of the inspirational aspects of astronomy that embody an invaluable shared resource for all countries.

The IYA2009 activities are taking place at the global and regional levels, and especially at the national and local levels. National Nodes in each state have been formed to prepare activities for 2009. These Nodes establish collaborations between professional and amateur astronomers, science centres, educators and science communicators in preparing activities for 2009. The International Year of Astronomy was proclaimed by the United Nations on 20 December 2007.

The IAU is the international astronomical organisation that brings together almost 10 000 distinguished astronomers from all nations of the world. Its mission is to promote and safeguard the science of astronomy in all its aspects through international cooperation. The IAU also serves as the internationally recognised authority for assigning designations to celestial bodies and the surface features on them. Founded in 1919, the IAU is the world's largest professional body for astronomers.

For more information

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