

Wired reports carry barbs

Internet environmental reporting is catching on fast. But **Paul Scott** has seen the future, and it doesn't work – yet

Almost all companies publishing environmental reports are now producing electronic versions on the internet. In theory, this dematerialisation of reports should be encouraged – resources are saved, costs are minimised, and the reports are available to anyone with a modem. The reality is a little less rosy. Internet reports are often difficult to access, time-consuming to download, and reduce company costs at the expense of the readership's phone bills.

The corporate sector appears convinced that electronic reporting is the way forward. While the 'dual approach' of paper and electronic ('hard' and 'soft') dominates among the almost 700 companies currently reporting, over the past couple of years several major companies have converted to issuing soft copies only, while others have only ever reported electronically (see table).

The approaches taken by these companies varies greatly. The first obstacle for the reader is that rather than leafing through a hard copy and skimming through the content, absorbing a paragraph here and there and reading the occasional page in more detail, an electronic

report demands time and attention. Some reports are real web-reports (html). They can be browsed, and issues picked from a menu, with connecting links.

The latest report from UK energy giant BP Amoco is in this style: it contains lots of information for the reader prepared to look for it, but it's easy to miss important aspects. The BP Amoco report marks a significant conversion to electronic reporting after its three individual hard copy reports last year. UK insurer CGNU's report is also an excellent use of this technology, and the report from Air Products, a US chemicals company, is brief but fast to access and effective.

The advantage of this technology is that it makes best use of the internet's capabilities. The downside is that most reports follow a tree structure, with individual issues as the individual branches. Readers have to visit each branch to get the full picture – often a tedious business.

Other reports rely on pdf files, which are accessed via the Acrobat reader. These pdf reports are basically electronic versions of hard copy publications. The advantage is that those favouring hard versions can print them

off and read them at leisure. The downside is that some of the files are massive – I usually give up if the file hasn't downloaded within 30 minutes, so didn't review the latest offering from the Hughes Electronics Corporation, a US aerospace company.

Perhaps the way forward is to reach a compromise, and either dispense with time-consuming sophisticated graphics (see US utility Green Mountain Power Corporation's site with its straightforward Coalition of Environmental Responsible Economies report) or offer both simplified and full versions (as does the excellent site from Swiss bank Credit Suisse, which also offers separate appendices as downloads and specifies the file size).

There is a trend away from publishing full hard copy reports, with parallel soft versions, to providing only a short summary hard report with the main report on the internet. Some of these summaries act more as guides to the electronic versions – such as BP Amoco's 'BPAmocoalive' eight-page update, and Swedish IT and communications company Ericsson's equally succinct 'Guide to Ericsson's Environmental Web Site Reporting' issued in 1999. There will be a slew of similar versions throughout 2000 as companies save printing costs by publishing summarised hard copies.

Third-party verification of electronic versions is emerging as a major issue. If a website can be amended and updated at any time, how can the readership be assured that any verification statement refers to the current version?

A route around this dilemma is to mark each report passage that has been verified, with the date the verifiers last looked at it. This is the approach taken by BP Amoco – which is effective, but potentially costly in terms of verifiers' fees over the year.

More worrying is that while soft reports are theoretically available to all, they may become less read. In practice, fewer stakeholders will take the active step of seeking out a company website and investing on-line time in scanning a report that, had it arrived in the post, might have been slipped into a briefcase and read during a quiet few minutes.

A further issue is that of archivability. While environmental progress can be measured against the targets and commitments of a filed hard copy report several years later, soft versions can change history by being quietly 'updated'.

Judging by the several hours it took to scan even the few reports detailed here, electronic reporting is not the great boon that will make access to reports easy and convenient. Companies need to make their reports available in several ways – full hard copies for those that prefer them (or a full pdf), summary versions for those that have a mild interest but no need for in-depth analysis, and well-signposted html versions that make the most of the internet and the level of detail and efficient cross-referencing (via hyperlinks) that it can provide. **Paul Scott** is director of Next Step Consulting, a London-based firm focusing on policy, strategy and communication of corporate environmental and social issues. E-mail: post@nextstep.co.uk. The firm's website, www.corporate-register.com, gives details of over 1,700 environmental reports

Electronic Converts

These companies previously produced (but have now discontinued) full 'hardcopy' reports

Company	'Hard Summary'	Website Address
Air Products & Chemicals Inc	✓	www.airproducts.com
Asahi Chemical Industry Co.		www.asahi-kasei.jp/asahi/english/esh_index.htm
BP Amoco plc	✓	www.bpamoco.com/alive
CGNU plc	✓	www.cgugroup.com/environment
Crédit Suisse Group	✓	www.credit-suisse.com/eco/index.html
Imperial Chemical Industries plc		www.ici.com/
Miele & Cie GmbH & Co		www.miele.de
Monsanto Company		www.monsanto.com/monsanto/sustain_98/
Perstorp AB		www.perstorp.com/pnet/ext/septp375.nsf/Environment
Sydney Water Corporation Ltd		www.sydneywater.com.au/environment/index.html
Union Carbide Corporation	✓	www.unioncarbide.com/resp/resp/ucres.html
Woolwich plc		www.woolwich.co.uk/environment99/

Companies which have only ever produced 'soft' reports

Fujitsu Ltd	www.fujitsu.co.jp
Green Mountain Power Corporation	www.gmpvt.com
Hughes Electronics Corporation	www.hughes.com/shear.html
International Business Machines Corporation GmbH	www.de.ibm.com
LSI Logic Corporation	www.lsillogic.com/about/abtenvmt.html
Public Service Enterprise Group	www.pseg.com
Sun Microsystems (UK)	www.sun.co.uk
Texas Instruments Inc	www.ti.com/corp/docs/company/citizen/esh/
United Parcel Service of America Inc	www.ups.com