

ITALIAN BIOMEDICAL SCIENTIFIC WEB SITE QUALITY EVALUATION

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BACKGROUND

Due to the uncontrolled spread of new biomedical web sites, it becomes essential for the scientific community to make it possible to evaluate both quality and reliance of the online information repository content. The Internet, so far, undoubtedly represents a democratic and free information system, as it gives the same importance to anybody having something to communicate, share or "just sell", without any distinction between scientifically sound resources and unsound ones. Computer graphics and free access are often guaranteed but this is not the case of the information content: texts are not certified and no references are provided. In most cases it is impossible to know the authors, the issues, the bibliographical references, and the updating frequency as well. This also happens even in Web Sites that are usually read by doctors, researchers (or even patients) that need to know how to approach to serious topics, such as diseases, new therapies or pharmacological treatments. At present, just a few examples of organizations devoted to the Web site certification are available. One of them is the HON Foundation (<http://www.hon.ch/>) which, after evaluation of some basic Web Sites characteristics, gives a "quality label" stating its reliability as an information source (pict. 1).



HON Fondation label

picture n. 1

AIMS

From this viewpoint the poster had the aim to discuss methodology for evaluating the Italian Web sites scientific quality in the biomedical area (human and animal health). This methodology was set up through a qualitative analysis of web sites of representative Italian Scientific Societies and Associations.

METHOD

The selection of web sources was carried out through a research on the most important available net spiders (Google, Altavista, Scirus).

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Thanks to this research we found some websites that grouped scientific medical societies and veterinarian ones all together.

Checking the list we choose to focus our attention on:

- "Federazione Italiana delle Società Medico Scientifiche" <http://www.fism.it/>
- Information Website of Biblioteca Centrale dell'Area Biomedica of Cagliari University <http://pacs.unica.it/biblio/societa.htm>

For veterinary sciences we used the Fatro® directory, the IZS list of Internet address in health and biomedical area, the veterinarian board and organization.

Each site was analysed through an "Evaluation Questionnaire" based on the criteria previously adopted by scientific organizations such as HON, DISCERN, AMA and IZS UM.

RESULTS

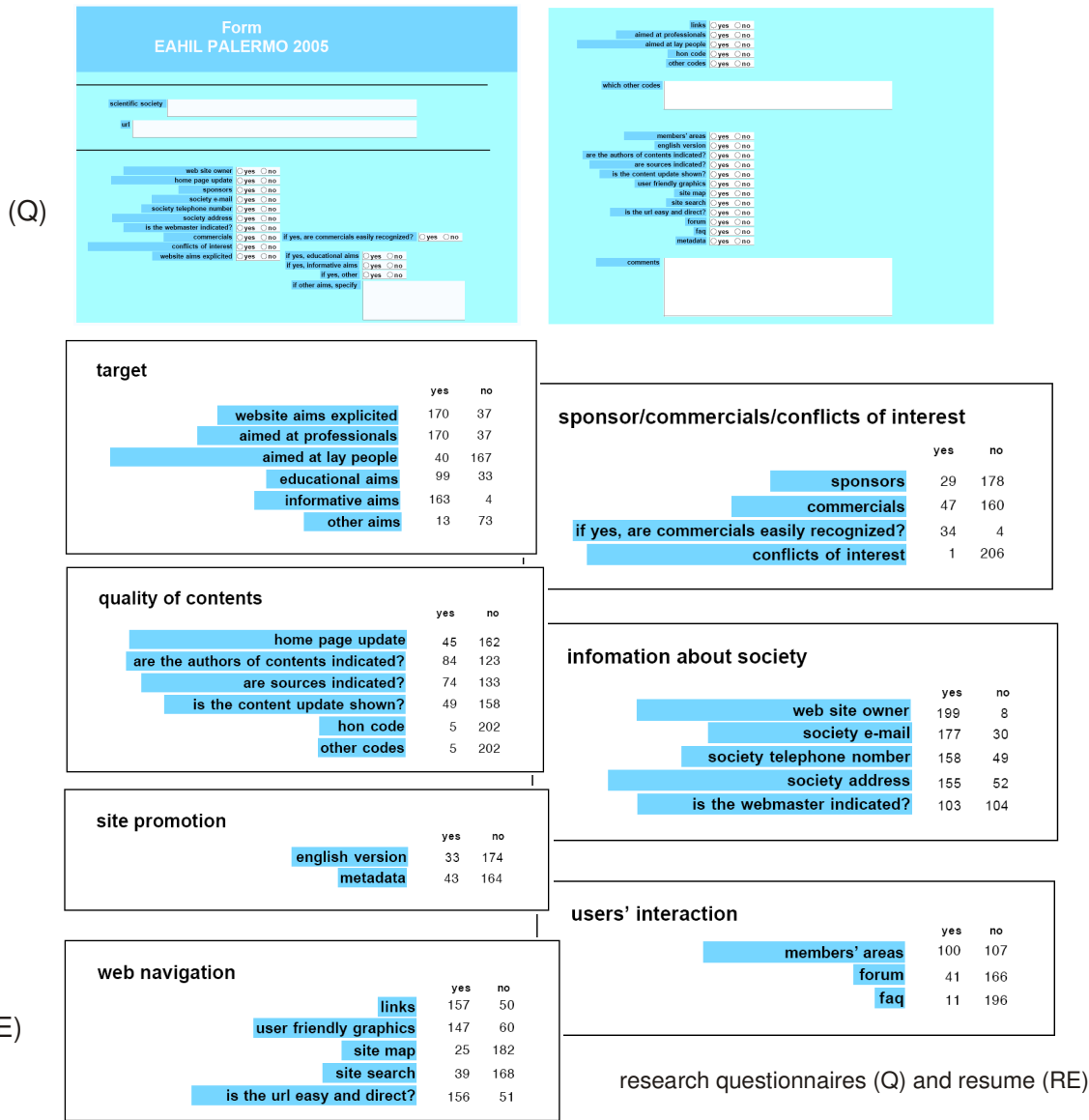
228 societies have been selected: 199 in the biomedical area and 29 in the veterinary field. For 21 societies it has not been possible to carry out any evaluation, either because the website does not exist (18) or because it is presently "in progress" (3)

Therefore, the survey has been based on 207 scientific and medical websites.

On the right we present the questionnaire (Q) used for the research and the resume (RE) of the evaluation carried out by a team of examiners (pict. 2).

From the questionnaire, interesting data were obtained. We worked out the dataset according to the following website quality evaluation parameters:

- discernible presence of information about the website owner
- high spreading and promotion of the initiative
- updating frequency and content quality
- easy interaction with the user (easy to browse and to use)
- target of the web page
- presence / absence of sponsors and promotional material.



picture n. 2

CONCLUSIONS

This work has provided a new picture of the “Health Web”, showing that the main purpose of scientific societies web sites is to inform their associates. It is indeed possible to find a massive presence of information for reaching the society, but while 75% of the sites include mail and e-mail addresses, in about 10% of them, this information is totally missing.

The large attention devoted to giving information on congresses, updating material, continuing education in medical science programs confirms that these web sites deal mainly with the training of subscribers. Low attention is devoted to the international certification of quality (e.g. Codex Hon), and indeed only 2.4% of the sites provides this information, while 2.4% declares to follow other kind of standards.

Few attention is paid to the international visibility of the sites, which is made clear by the low percentage of pages translated in English (15.9%), or using the "meta data" (20.8%). In 40.5% of the cases site texts are not signed by the author, in 35.7% the sources of information are not declared, while 21.7% of them do not report the last updating date. As far as site users are concerned, only in 40 cases (19.3%) a specific Consumer area exists. These observations confirm the professional role of these sites (50% of website has a reserved area for associates). A low presence of commercials and sponsors is found. Friendly graphics and a direct and intuitive URL, in most cases, allow the websites of these societies to be easily reached and browsed.