

Web publishing standards

Discussion notes for presentation at the Community Web Workers Conference,
Sydney, 8-9 November 2004

Prue Deacon, HealthInsite Editorial Team, Australian Government Department of
Health and Ageing

prue.deacon@health.gov.au

phone: 02 6289 7505

HealthInsite background

- HealthInsite (www.healthinsite.gov.au) is a gateway website, linking to health information resources on Australian websites – 75 information partners around Australia are contributing nearly 12000 resources.
- Over half the partners are NGOs, many of them small support groups.
- Partners undergo a site assessment / quality assurance process before coming on board.
- My role is mainly managing metadata, but I have had a fair bit to do with developing publishing standards.

Why publishing standards?

- As in any field, standards give you a framework which leads to consistency (for developers and users), helps in quality assurance and saves time / money.
- As far as publishing goes, have a look at the article by Gerry McGovern “Web content management depends on trust” (Gerry McGovern New Thinking, October 25 2004, www.gerrymcgovern.com/nt/2004/nt_2004_10_25_content_management.htm)
- It starts: “You must be able to stand over everything that is published on your website and say that it is all accurate and up-to-date. Trust is a fundamental building block of professional web content management.”

HealthInsite publishing standards

www.healthinsite.gov.au/content/publishing_standards.cfm

- The HealthInsite standards apply to most web publishing, not just the health area.
- The standards are divided into 4 sections – quality of information, authentication, technical issues and accessibility.
- I will explain each area briefly and then discuss a particular issue from each one.
- In web publishing we often refer to “resources”. A resource may be a fact sheet, a publication or information about a service or organisation. It may also be a group of items (where the entry point is the top level page) or a whole website (where the entry point is the home page).
- You need to have your own standards, policies and procedures. If you are a contributor to a gateway site, then these will need to be consistent with the gateway standards.

Quality of information

- This includes qualifications of creators, accuracy, appropriateness for target audience, documentation of source material, clearance procedures.

- To maintain the credibility of HealthInsite, we insist that each partner has a suitable written quality assurance policy and procedure. We are not in a position to fully check every resource that we link to; that is the partner's responsibility.
- With respect to audience, having standards does not mean that information should be boring. On the contrary, resources should be interesting and informative, and acknowledge the user's frame of reference rather than your organisation's mindset.
- The title, introductory paragraph and headings need to be written to attract the desired audience and encourage them to read further.
- In another recent article, Gerry McGovern explores this issue: "Secrets of great web headings and summaries", Gerry McGovern New Thinking, November 01 2004, www.gerrymcgovern.com/nt/2004/nt_2004_11_01_web_writing.htm

Authentication

- This means clear and explicit statements of title, creator, publisher and date – these are key features for users deciding whether to trust the resource.
- Authentication is needed on every page; when users come to your site via public search engines or gateway sites, they will often bypass your homepage and other navigation pages.
- The biggest problem we have in HealthInsite is the way our partners date, misdate or fail to date their resources.
- We advise our partners that users have a right and a need to know the currency of the resources they are viewing. Users do not expect you to check and verify every resource on your site every day. But they do like to know whether what they are viewing is absolutely the latest, or is perhaps a few years old.
- By putting a date of publication (or of last modification) on a resource, the publisher makes a declaration that the resource was current at that date. This also offers some legal protection. Review and updating of the site can then be done in a methodical unrushed way.
- Dates inserted by an automatic process (eg javascript coding) are often inaccurate!

Technical issues

- This covers markup and presentation procedures, and metadata. It is the style guide which identifies the features that the IT system has to support.
- The main focus of the technical standards is to facilitate the user experience of moving around a site. For example, one of our recommendations is "fast loading resources which are clear and logical in their operation".
- One problem area for HealthInsite has been when partner sites use frames. Frames make it difficult for search engines and gateway sites to link directly to resources. We have a work-around but it is not entirely satisfactory. Frames are best avoided.

Accessibility

- This is being discussed in another conference session, so I will not expand here.

- One issue which keeps returning is the use of PDFs, particularly where no alternative version of the resource is provided. It is contentious, and I recommend you read the article by Roger Hudson “PDF and accessibility”, Web Usability – accessibility and usability services, August 2004 www.usability.com.au/resources/pdf.cfm
- In particular: “The general opinion of the accessibility community world wide however, is that the use of PDFs on Websites still presents a significant barrier for people with disabilities, in particular for sight impaired Web users who rely on screen reader technology.” Also: “In Australia, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has indicated that the use of PDF documents on Websites is still a significant accessibility issue.”
- My main personal objections to PDFs are that they often have columns (making them extremely difficult to read online) and that they interrupt web surfing (where you may be skimming a range of pages before stopping to read one fully).
- There is a problem for community organisations in that creating a PDF is relatively cheap. However, if you can devise some standard styles and templates, then creating an HTML version should not be too expensive for short articles and factsheets.
- The HealthInsite viewpoint is that all short consumer resources should be available in HTML.

Maintenance

- Maintenance is vital for trust and credibility, but it is a major cost.
- There are two tasks: maintaining your publishing standards as the web develops and maintaining your published resources.
- It is important to have a review schedule which covers every page and resource on your site. You need to update or remove as needed. Where older resources are retained, they should be clearly dated and annotated if they are retained for archival purposes.
- Make sure that the currency of your resources is clear.

Conclusion

- Concentrate on quality, usability, accessibility and sustainability rather than quantity.
- A very useful tool for keeping up-to-date with website issues is the Victorian eGovernment Resource Centre newsletter “What’s new?” www.egov.vic.gov.au/whatsnew/whatsnew.htm