Evolution of Health Web certification, through the HONcode experience

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Summary

Today, the Web is a medium with increasing pervasiveness around the world. Its use is constantly growing and the medical field is no exception. With this large amount of information, the problem is no longer about finding information but assessing the credibility of the publishers as well as the relevance and accuracy of the documents retrieved from the web. This problem is particularly relevant in the medical area which has a direct impact on the well-being of citizens and in the Web 2.0 context where information publishing is easier than ever. To address the quality of the medical Internet, the HONcode certification proposed by the Health On the Net Foundation (HON) is certainly the most successful initiative. The aims of this paper are to present certification activity through the HONcode experience and to show that certification is more complex than a simple code of conduct. Therefore, we firstly present the HONcode, its application and its current evolutions. Following that, we give some quantitative results and describe how the final user can access the certified information.

Introduction

In recent years the ease of publishing on the Internet has been further increased with the advent of the Web 2.0 phenomenon. Thus, despite the wealth of content available, the question is not just about finding information but also whether the information provided is credible. The problem is particularly acute in the medical information domain (explanation of the disease, recommended treatment, type of medicine for example) which has a direct impact on the health of the public [1–3]. In response to the lack of transparency of the health information, many theoretical and practical initiatives have marked the short history of the Web. The history of the quality of information on the Web is intimately linked to developments in information retrieval. The most significant trends that have been applied to the Web on the quality of information (medical or not) are: the selection of webpages (e.g., Yahoo), self-regulation (e.g., Discern [4]), the popularity of webpages (e.g., Page Rank [5–7]), the certification of websites (e.g., URAC [8], HONcode [9]), education of the user (e.g., OMNI [10]) and the collaboration of users (e.g., Google Co-op [11]). Simple at first glance, the HONcode certification is based on four basic and indispensable elements. Indeed, experience has shown that 1; ethical charter was only one of the visible elements of certification despite being essential. Thus 2; procedures according to the HONcode assessments are vital because they reflect the practical and equitable implementations of the HONcode in the daily work of HONcode reviewers. Following this, 3; task certification is emerging as the key asset of certification. In fact other health codes have not been sustained because few people had volunteered to implement them. Finally, 4; the means used to provide access to this information on the Internet.

Method and development of the HONcode

Certification

It is possible to cite the most prominent initiatives with their most salient features (see also [12]): Initiated in 1995, the implementation of the HONcode (third party certification, 8 principles audited annually) began in 1996, Discern (self-evaluation) in 1998, WebMedica in 1998 (certification only for Spanish), MedCERTAIN (detailed meta-data system) and Hi-Ethics (third party certification) in 2000, eHealth Code of Ethics (self-evaluation) in 2001, URAC in 2001 (very detailed but expensive), European Guidelines in 2002 (Eq. HONcode principles of the HON which participated in the development) and AFGIS in 2003 (dedicated to German sites). While some initiatives have disappeared or others do not have many candidates, the HONcode has been translated into 35 languages, had over 7300 sites certified by the middle of 2010 in 102 countries and had been selected in 2007 by France to be the official certification body of French health websites.

Certification process

HONcode certification [13] is a voluntary act on the part of the site applicant; the first step is submitting the application form on the HON website. A pre-assessment is proposed to the webmaster in order to identify the missing principles. Once the certification request is submitted,
HON experts evaluate the websites that have applied. Each ethical principle which is not being complied by and should be added to the content of the webpages is indicated. Once the changes have been made, a seal of certification and unique identification is issued. All HONcode sites are certified for a period of 1 year and are reviewed annually in a systematic way. If a website no longer respects the HONcode principles, the webmaster receives a warning and if required changes are not made, the site may then lose its certification. As you can see, the certification process is an interactive process that provides a constructive contact between auditors (HON) and the webmaster. Indeed, the aim is not only to separate the wheat from the chaff but also help to bring up sites to a certain level of quality and transparency. In keeping with this aim, some additions have been made in the regulations implementing the HONcode principles to address the peculiarities of Web 2.0 (detailed Web 2.0 guidelines see table 1 and [13]). The collaborative platform in addition to the current guidelines should respect these, as well the ones added specific to the Web 2.0.

Results of the certification and access to the final user

Currently the database contains more than 7300 HONcode certified websites across 102 countries representing more than 1 million pages indexed in Google. 52% of the certified sites are in English and about 20% are in French, followed by Spanish, Italian, Australian and German sites (table 2 to see evolution). For each evaluated site, the following informations are collected: 1; the HONcode principles respected, 2; text extracted corresponding to the 8 principles, 3; URLs of the principles on the site, 4; MeSH keyword terms [18] selected from the site and 5; more general site labels.

Table 1
Web 2.0 specificity of HONcode.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles</th>
<th>Regulations for implementations of principles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Authoritative</td>
<td>It must be clearly stated if the platform is moderated or not (...). It must be stated if platform users are warned or notified before being banned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Complementary</td>
<td>The complementary statement should be added to the platform main page.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Privacy</td>
<td>It should be clearly mentioned that any messages could be used in other messages. It must be clearly stated if the platform user has the possibility to modify or erase his posts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Attribution</td>
<td>A statement asking platform users to give references (links for example) to the health/medical information they provide, when not from personal experience, must be provided. All posts must be automatically dated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Justifiability</td>
<td>It must be clearly stated that platform users must post informations which are true and correct to their knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Transparency</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Financial disclosure</td>
<td>It must be clearly stated if the moderators are volunteers or not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Advertising policy</td>
<td>An advertising and editorial policy about the platform user’s posts must be provided. It must be stated if advertisement (links, banners, content...) is permitted or not on the platform.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>French subscription</th>
<th>Subscription for all countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>898</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>1142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>1409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>1604</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Automatic detection of principles

In view of the dynamics of the Web, the certification is in continuous expansion. Recently, initiatives based on algorithms of criteria recognition, based on rules (originally proposed by Price [14]) or by automatic learning were presented to give an indication of quality and ethics to the pages of Web health. While the model of supervised learning, Aphinyanaphongs [15], is based on static examples of good and bad pages and therefore dependent on fields, the HON approach is more generic since it is based on the mod-

In early 1996, a simple seal was introduced, allowing users to identify a certified site from a non-certified site. However, the HONcode seal quickly became an additional safeguard for the Internet by requiring the sites to link the HONcode seal to the unique HONcode certificate on the HON site. The idea is to limit misuse of the HONcode seal, as the final verification is done on the HON site. The new basic principle is that custody by HON ultimately enables control of the display of the HONcode seal (the single image generated for a given site and is also hosted at HON, fig. 1). Google is the search engine most used on the Internet; it could become the perfect tool for the promotion and awareness of the quality of medical information on the Internet. In 2006, Google launched its collaborative platform

Figure 1
Dynamic HONcode logo following the current status of the HONcode certification process.
Google Co-op. In our case, the procedure is to propose to Google.com annotations of webpage compared with pre-determined labels (in agreement with Google) such as “treatment” and “type of audience” for example. Thus the latest information provided by Google through HON consisted of 83243 annotations for a total of 49305 URLs (or patterns) (see fig. 2 point 4 green). The HON Toolbar [19] is the most integrated way to access HONcode certified sites (fig. 2 point 1, 2, and 3). It is composed of 3 features (shown in red fig. 2) which are: 1; Identification of the HONcode membership in real time while browsing the Web; 2; The search tool, HONcodeHunt, exclusively dedicated to certified HONcode sites is accessible from the search bar of the browser; 3; The emphasis of certified sites in popular search tools such as Google, Yahoo, MedlinePlus [20] and Wikipedia.

Conclusion and perspectives

The aim of this paper was to show the many facets of the HONcode through its history, its evolution, implementation and use. During the past 14 years, HON has sought to promote the quality of medical information on the Web on a global scale. To meet the quantitative requirements of the Web, human expertise is assisted by many automated systems for a systematic, reliable and faster evaluation of websites. It is very important to expand distribution channels to reach as many potential users. Thus the realization of collaborations, to share our information, our philosophy and our vision, with major players such as the National Library of Medicine (USA) or Google is essential. The approach led by the HON is comprehensive and covers more than 35 languages around the world. However, HON must respond to local needs, the variety of languages, cultural differences and different regulations. The creation of local branches in different parts of the world, such as those initiated in Africa, Italy or Spain, should enable us to think locally and act globally to improve the quality of medical information on the Internet. France is the pioneer in quality eHealth by legislating on the issue of quality of health sites. A similar approach in other European countries would be welcomed to continue to promote the quality of medical information on the Internet for the benefit of Internet users.

References

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