

Methods for Assessing Information Sites

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Abstract –This paper looks into the methods of website assessment and their effectiveness in the assessment of innovatory online editions. A comparative analysis of the leading Bulgarian informative portals is also made.

Keywords – Newspapers, On-line editions, news, news sites, regional media

I. INTRODUCTION

At present there are numerous methods for the assessment and carrying out of comparative analysis of national, administrative and educational sites. It appears, however, that there is a lack of a unified methodology developed for the assessment of informative news websites, despite the fact that almost every user seeking information online makes use of such resources. This is what has been the motivation for the current research.

The existing methods for evaluation of sites are reviewed in the first part of the report. The second part is dedicated to one of the main carriers of information in the net - on-line news agencies and in the last part of the report there is a comparison of the three of the leading Bulgarian news portals using the pointed methods and some new ones are added.

II. METHODS FOR WEBSITE ASSESSMENT

The most commonly used methods for website assessment can be split into two major subgroups:

- Common;
- Specialised (Private).

The specialised methods are aimed at the assessment of a particular type of websites such as sites on: - Education; - E-trading; - Health sites; - Public administration and E-government. No private method has had its way in the assessment of news sites, operating in connection with the regional print media so far.

The common methods are used to assess random websites. Here are three of the most commonly used methods:

- WEbQEM (Web Quality Evaluation Method) (2003), worked out by a team under the supervision of Luis Olsina from the La Pampa University, Argentina;
- Goor and Murphy (2002);
- Jan Alexander and Marsha Ann Tate (1998).

WEbQEM is based on a full-scale, easily adaptable tree of

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quality website requirements, which is fully-fledged, has 5 levels of fraction and a total of over 100 elements.

When the **Goor and Murphy** method for website assessment is used, there are fewer and more restricted indicators for objective quality measurement [7]. Goor and Murphy divide the assessment criteria into groups as follows:

Content criteria

The basic forms of control under these criteria are conformity and key word checks – HTML meta tag key words in particular are checked on the basis of their frequency of occurrence within the text throughout the whole site, as well as for correct spelling – its quality is an indicator for the overall website quality.

Technical criteria. What is rendered an account of is:

- The time needed for connection to the site and the time required for the data to be received, while the developed Goor and Murphy software calculates the statistically normalised average value of these indicators.

- Link functioning – whether those links are valid or not.

- Analysis of the size of the files comprised in the site.

Organisational criteria – an example of this is the so called internal "diameter" used for interrelated links, internal to the website ("Internal Link Diameter").

The **Jan Alexander and Marsha Ann Tate** "Web Resource Evaluation Techniques" published in 1998 are based on 5 "traditional assessment criteria" of the various sources of information. According to their originators, like any other source of information, web-resources are subject to assessment on the basis of the above-mentioned five criteria, so long as certain specifications of the information in the web are being indicated [1]. Below are enumerated the criteria and specific questions applied when a website is assessed on the basis of its news content.

A News Web Page is one whose primary purpose is to provide most up-to-date information [2].

AUTHORITY [2]

- Is it clear what company or organization is responsible for the contents of the page?

- Is there a link to a page describing the goals of the company or organization providing the information?

- Is there a way of verifying the legitimacy of the company or organization? That is, is there a phone number or postal address to contact for more information? (Simply an email address is not enough).

- Is there a non-Web equivalent version of the material which would provide a way of verifying its legitimacy?

- If a page contains individual articles, do you know who wrote the articles and his/her qualifications for writing on the topic?

- Is there a statement giving the company's name as copyright holder?

ACCURACY [2]

- Are the sources for factual information clearly listed so they can be verified in another source?
 - Are there editors and fact checkers monitoring the accuracy of the information being published?
 - Is the information free of spelling, grammatical, and typographical errors? These kinds of errors not only indicate a lack of quality control, but can actually produce inaccuracies in information.

OBJECTIVITY [5]

- Is the informational content clearly separated from the advertising and opinion content?
 - Are editorials and opinion pieces clearly labeled?

CURRENCY [5]

- Is there a link to an informational page which describes how frequently the material is updated?
 - Is there an indication of when the page was last updated?
 - Is there a date on the page to indicate when the page was placed on the Web?
 - If a newspaper, does it indicate what edition of the paper the page belongs to?
 - If a broadcast, does it indicate the date and time the information on the page was originally broadcast?

COVERAGE

- Is there a link to an informational page which describes the coverage of the source?
 - If you are evaluating a newspaper page and there is a print equivalent, is there an indication of whether the Web coverage is more or less extensive than the print version?

Additional criteria which enlarge this model and they are tested in practice by the authors, they can be:

AVAILABLE ARCHIVE

- The free archive gives the opportunity of monitoring every site. It is an useful option for the user.

SEARCH OPTIONS

- Facilitates the user in finding information in the site

MOBILE PLATFORM

- The users of mobile phones generate more and more traffic in Internet. The mobile platform is a lighter version of the site. It saves traffic and time for access of the users.

USERS' COMMENTS

- The possibility the user to comment the content of the site or a part of its content gives not only a feedback but it is also a means of communication among its users.

AVAILABLE RSS CHANNELS (Really Simple Syndication)

- By RSS channel the users are informed about new information in the site. It gives an easy connection to the social nets.

The following **practical** steps in the assessment of a particular website [3] can be summed up as follows:

1. Domain assessment

- Domain extension (.bg/com/org/net/info/)
 - The possession of all extensions and derivatives of the domain

- Popularity of the brand and originality of the name

- Length of domain existence

2. Popularity within the search engines

- Hyper links and other sites (Backlinks)

- Index pages (indexed pages)

- Ranking in Google (Google PageRank)

3. Layout and programming code

- website design

- Administration/ Content management (the extent of its applicability)

- Programming language (html, flash, php, asp, ajax, java)

4. Content

- Volume

- Type (created by users; copyright articles)

- Update

- Staff, needed for its maintenance

5. Viewing

- Number of unique users per day (a popular method for the assessment of websites, supported by affiliate networks is the number of unique users per day, multiplied by 10 USD)

- Number of page reloads per user (a main criterion for news sites)

- Cyclic repetitive viewings (monthly, daily, hourly)

6. Users

- User profile

- Number of registered users

- Common conditions of use, approved by user during the registration process

7. Financing

- Monthly revenue (an average estimate over the past 12 months)

- Type of revenue (coming from advertising, subscriptions, sales or services)

- Number of clients / advertiser

- Monthly expenses

III. ON-LINE NEWS AGENCIES

In the age of information the most frequently visited sites in the Net are those of the information agencies. The readers find information on the current affairs not only in the country but also worldwide. The strength of the agencies arises from the fact that they not only are being the first to report the news but they also keep up-to-date news coverage. Thus the reader is literally immersed in the news and thanks to the audio-visual materials becomes witness to the current affairs.

In Bulgaria there are a number of websites, but few of them have the capacity to cover and generate news independently. Most websites are far from the concept "informative systems" or the Cohen criteria for defining what we called Informing Science in 1999.

The quality informative websites within the Bulgarian online space are based on news agencies, such as BTA and

BGNES, television companies - bTV and NovaTV or on radio stations, such as Darik and Focus.

Thus, with one and the same technical and human resources news are being covered and information flows generated, yet there are more channels for their transfer, which is effective and at the same time economically expedient.



Fig. 1. Authority – focus-news.net

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NEWS WEBSITES

Analysis of the framework and content of websites at <http://www.focus-news.net/>, <http://www.bgnes.com/> and www.dariknews.bg, in accordance with the criteria, outlines in the first part of this paper.

Authority. There should be an organisation, held

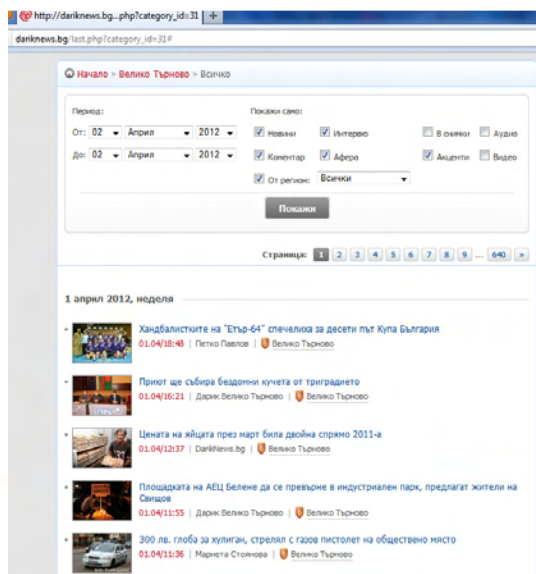


Fig. 2. Search criteria – dariknews.bg

responsible for the content update. All three organisations have a separate section called “About us” (Fig. 1) at their disposal, where one can get detailed information about the owner of every organization, its contact details and staff members. A significant drawback in bgnes.com is that the name of every author should be placed under each of the publications, whereas the numerous photo materials do have an author included at the bottom.

Accuracy. The three websites follow the basic journalist principle of relying on more than one source of information, in all other cases – its full citation should be provided. The texts in dariknews.bg are accompanied by a sound file based on the type of news coverage (a report, an interview, a press conference), while in bgnes.com a video file is being attached. In the work of focus-news.net one can notice a tendency towards covering of current events in progress, by adding or correcting the information in the publications to come.

Objectivity. The information content presented by the agencies can be clearly identified from the advertisements present in their websites. The authors’ opinions are always listed in the form of independent comments.

Currency. The three agencies organize their work in such a way as to clearly indicate the date and time of every news publication. This allows the users quickly find the latest update of a particular event.

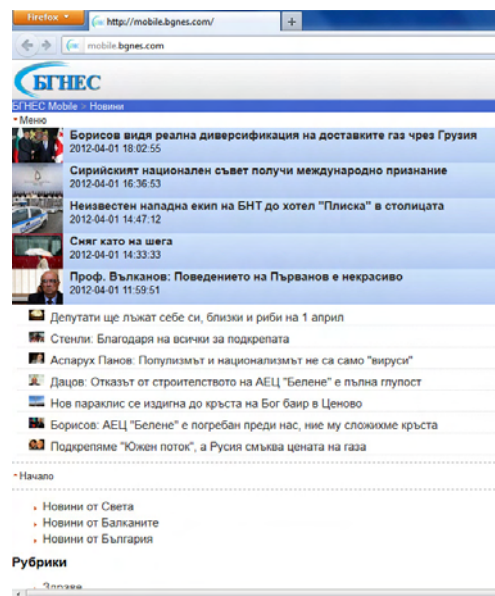


Fig. 3. Mobile – bgnes.com

Coverage. There is news classification indicated under to their national or regional aspect in all three informative websites. Thus, users can read the news from a region of their choice. The whole content of the websites is available worldwide.

Viewing. Agencies do not provide public access to their web-counter.

Comparative analysis based on additional criteria:

Available archive. Only dariknews.bg possesses an independent archive, storing old publications, accessible online. The archive is context oriented, directed towards

current news and region being chosen. The archives in bgnes.com and focus-news.net are available against a paid subscription.

Search options. There is no such system within the commonly accessed free section of bgnes.com, and the news search is only possible against a paid subscription. The search options in focus-news.net are not efficient enough and therefore it is not possible to search under specified criteria. The best organized search system is in dariknews.bg (Fig.2), which the searching to be carried out over a specified period of time under various criteria (in news, comments, interviews, regional news, audio and video news only).

Mobile platform. For users' convenience all three agencies offer the opportunity for access to their content through smart phones (Fig. 3). With such access users are automatically redirected to the mobile platform of the respective agency, thus receiving speedy loading and saving of traffic data. Every user has the opportunity to choose the loading of the full (Desktop) version of the website.

Automatic reload. The websites of all three agencies undergo automatically refresh of the information on the user's browser over specified intervals.

Available **RSS** channels (Really Simple Syndication). Only dariknews.bg supports such software mechanism for news exchange.

Users' comments. There exists the opportunity for every news to be discussed and commented by the readers. Only website of dariknews.bg provides this service.

V. CONCLUSION

The news sites are not only one of the main carriers of information on the Internet but, what is more, in the informative century they serve as a channel used by all other means of mass communication (newspapers, radio stations and television).

Such a comparison of news sites has not been offered up to now. A comparative analysis of sites of three news agencies has been done and the existing methods of evaluation have been extended.

The reviewed most common methods of evaluation of sites, as well as the carried out comparison are a base on which the problem to be analyzed and tested in details in future. An automated system for evaluation and analysis of informative sites is being worked out according to the pointed criteria.

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