



The Children's
Partnership

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New Study Released:

Consensus Emerging on Criteria for "Quality Online Content" But Needs of Low-Income and Other Underserved Internet Users Overlooked

The Children's Partnership Issues Guidelines for Creating Internet Content Accessible to More Users

WASHINGTON, D.C. Today, The Children's Partnership (TCP) released a benchmark study, *The Search for High-Quality Online Content for Low-Income and Underserved Communities*, which examines how various fields such as health, education and Web site usability identify "quality" in online content and whether they address the needs of disadvantaged Internet users. (See <http://www.contentbank.org/research/QualityContent.pdf>.) The report found that:

A consensus is emerging on what characteristics of online content constitute quality. A survey of 100 sets of guidelines used to evaluate content shows that a handful of characteristics, such as clear identification of the site's source and currency of the information, appear in more than 50% of guidelines reviewed.

However, less than 10% of guidelines included characteristics that address the needs of low-income or other underserved communities, like content in more than one language or the literacy level of the text.

"While there is growing agreement about what quality online content looks like, it's clear that the unique needs of low-income Internet users are not yet part of that picture," said Wendy Lazarus, Co-President of TCP and a co-author of the study.

Results of Survey of 100 Content Evaluation Guidelines

Criterion* (See below for further explanation)	% of guidelines including criterion
Source	91%
Currency	86%
Accuracy of content	71%
Usability	64%
Technical aspects	60%
Contact information	55%
Design	41%
Clear distinction between advertising and editorial information	27%
Accessible to those with disabilities	24%
Cost	22%
Privacy	20%
Ability to contribute to the site's content	9%
Multilingual	8%
Accessible to limited-literacy audiences	6%
Cultural inclusiveness and relevance	6%

"As the Web increasingly becomes the way people look for jobs, apply for drivers' licenses, or register to vote, it is critical that the information be accessible to those with limited-literacy or English-language skills, for example," she added.

Previous research by The Children's Partnership revealed that up to 50 million Americans face significant barriers to being able to fully benefit from information on the Internet. These barriers include online information, which is written exclusively in English and at literacy levels too difficult for many users. Also, most online content rarely includes information like housing, jobs or health, at a neighborhood level, or information that is culturally relevant to a wide range of ethnic communities. These factors are important to many low-income users. (See *Online Content for Low-Income and Underserved Americans: The Digital Divide's New Frontier* at http://www.childrenspartnership.org/pub/low_income/index.html.)

To help address this gap, The Children's Partnership has released a set of guidelines designed to help businesses, government, educators and instructors, and nonprofits identify and create "low barrier" online information.

"This is a critical moment in the development of Internet content. As leading researchers begin to zero in on a set of criteria to define "quality" content, it is crucial that characteristics that matter to low-income users are not ignored. These guidelines are a practical first step toward creating content that can reach many more Internet users – who are eager to participate in the online revolution," said Laurie Lipper, also a co-author of the study and Co-President of The Children's Partnership.

The report also includes:

- Additional findings about the current state of efforts to evaluate content across the fields of health, education, access for the disabled, multi-lingual content, consumer usability, "plain language" and multicultural content, among others;
- Examples of those working to develop content at the local level and the guidelines they have created to measure quality online;
- Detailed recommendations for action covering consumer education, media literacy, e-government, broadband access, public and private sector policies, and venture capital investing;
- The Children's Partnership's new guidelines for creating and evaluating Internet content; and
- Extensive lists of programs, guidelines and research on the topic of online content evaluation.

Support for The Children's Partnership's program Online Content for Low-Income and Underserved Communities and this report has been provided by the AOL Time Warner Foundation and the Markle Foundation, as well as by The California Wellness Foundation and the Blue Ridge Foundation New York.

For further information contact Laurie Lipper, 202.429.0033. The report is available in PDF format at <http://www.contentbank.org/research/QualityContent.pdf>.

*Explanation of criteria used in survey of 100 sets of evaluation criteria:

- **Source**
Is the sponsor or creator of the site identified?
- **Currency**
Is it clear when the site was last updated or how old the content is?
- **Accuracy of content**
Is the site's information correct and objective?
- **Usability**
Is it easy and intuitive to navigate the site? Is it well organized?
- **Technical aspects**
Are the links working, is the site free of errors, and does the site download fast?
- **Contact information**
Is there a way to contact the site's sponsor via email or other ways?
- **Design**
Is the overall design appealing, with appropriate use of color, graphics, and readable fonts?
- **Clear distinction between advertising and editorial information**
Are there clear distinctions between advertising and editorial information?
- **Accessible to those with disabilities**
Is the site's content accessible to persons with physical or cognitive disabilities?
- **Cost**
Is there a cost associated with the site's content?
- **Privacy**
Is there a privacy notice outlining how personally identifiable information is used?
- **Ability to contribute to the site's content**
Is there a way for users to contribute to the site's content, as through a message board, feedback area, or rating system?
- **Multilingual**
Is the content available in a language(s) other than English?
- **Accessible to limited-literacy audiences**
Is the information presented in a way that can be easily understood by users with limited-literacy skills?
- **Cultural Inclusiveness & Relevance**
Is the site intended for or relevant to a particular cultural or ethnic group, or does it reflect cultural and ethnic diversity?

About The Children's Partnership: Mission and Program Summary

The Children's Partnership (TCP) is a national, nonprofit organization working to ensure that children, especially those at risk of being left behind, have the resources and opportunities they need to have productive and healthy lives. TCP researches trends and emerging issues that affect large numbers of children and provides analysis, strategies and model programs to effect solutions.

The Children's Partnership has been working on issues of children and the digital media since 1994, when TCP published the first comprehensive look at how the digital society impacts children (*America's Children and the Information Superhighway*). In 1996, TCP released the award-winning *Parents' Guide to the Information Superhighway: Rules and Tools for Families Online*, a first-of-its-kind guide providing parents with the information necessary to help children in the new age of information technology. Current programs include:

Online Content for Low-income and Underserved Communities

A research, Web publishing, and advocacy program to promote the development of content for and by underserved communities (www.contentbank.org).

Young Americans and the Digital Future

A multiyear information and education program to promote state and local policies that increase young people's access to the benefits of the Internet and other information technologies (www.techpolicybank.org).

California Advocacy Program

A state-based model program to effect public policy changes that increase access to and use of technology in low-income communities, in partnership with the **California Community Technology Policy Group** (www.ccptg.org).