Newsletter

Issue 1, September 2005

What is QUATRO ?

A range of quality labelling schemes exist across Europe, some of which are part-funded by other EU programmes. In each case, a website is awarded the right to display the quality label or trustmark after going through a review process. Users of websites displaying the label may click on a logo to see data supplied by the labelling scheme operator to confirm its validity.

However, these labels/trustmarks are invisible to search engines and other agents which limits their usefulness. A user must already be on a website before he or she knows it meets a labelling scheme's criteria. Furthermore, the logo is often displayed on just the homepage and is not necessarily easily visible to end users at the point at which they seek assurance. QUATRO will address this by providing the means for a quality label – any quality label – to be machine-readable for a variety of purposes and displayed wherever the user may be on a site.

QUATRO (Quality Assurance and Content Description) is a European-funded project under the Safer Internet Action Plan which started in December 2004. Its aim is to develop a new common platform for quality labels and trustmarks, making it possible for the many existing labelling schemes to be brought together through a single, coherent approach without affecting an individual scheme's assessment criteria or independence. The platform will support:

- Easy, flexible routes for content providers to add quality labels to their sites that are both 'visible' to humans and machines
- Automatic validation of quality labels against a label operator's database
- Real-time probabilistic label verification.

As well, the proposed platform will have direct applicability to content descriptions, classification and so-called "discovery metadata." In short: one system, many uses.

There are three project participants that label web pages. Those that bear the ICRA label self-classify their content. "Web Médica Acreditada" of the "Col•legi Oficial de Metges de Barcelona" (Official Medical Association of Barcelona), WMA, checks the quality of medical webpages. IQUA labels pages of all kinds in accordance with a set of requirements which include editorial quality, suitability for minors and accessibility.

The other six QUATRO partners provide technical expertise, knowledge from previous research into quality labels, dissemination channels and management. QUATRO has collaborated with organisations such as the Internet Association of Japan and enjoys the support and active interest of many more. For example, the QUATRO platform is the leading candidate technology for use in the W3C's Mobile Web Initiative to support the proposed "mobileOK" trustmark. Finally, ICRA have already started using the QUATRO platform for its labelling system. See http://www.icra.org for further information.

Quatro Survey Results

In order to ensure that the needs of the stakeholders were met, the project team conducted a survey regarding the user expectations on machine-readable labels. The stakeholders were identified as:

- Search engines and portals
- Content providers
- End users
- Industry Associations
- ISPs
- Trustmark and Quality Label schemes
- Business to Business Traders
- Business to Consumer Traders
- Others such as special interest groups and websites for clubs and social organizations.

These results from the survey form the basis of a common schema that underpins a range of quality labels.The feedback of the stakeholders resulted in the following conclusions:

- A label needs to convey trust. According to the respondents, trust is increased when they see a code of conduct or a form of validation. Just under a half of the respondents want to see some sort of supporting information whilst one out of three would like to see a required mandatory full verification (and a further 16% wanted optional verification).

- Almost everyone thinks end-users are more likely to visit a website if they see from the search engine results that the website has a trustmark.

- The content providers and online traders feel that trustmarks are a possible benefit to their business models.

- The results show that especially the business-to-consumer trustmarks schemes and search engines are adopting a waiting game policy regarding QUATRO. The reason for this could be that they haven't got a clear idea of how QUATRO will work and what the implementation costs will be.

- The majority of the stakeholders responded that websites that have the highest demand for trustmark schemes are mainly the ones that deal with personal or financial data, health information, education and those of public sector bodies.

In addition, two thirds of the respondents see added value in having lists of labelled websites in a database format, the other third being unsure. Half of the respondents see added value in lists of websites that had their label revoked in a database format.

The concept of machine-readable trustmark schemes was well supported. Such labels could be visualised through a single portal that can read all trustmark schemes although support for this was not high (63% maybe and 5% against). Such lukewarm support may be because it was not explained how such a portal would work.

A more likely scenario for the future is that existing portals and search engines will simply annotate search results that link to sites that contain trustmarks. Such annotations must be generated automatically and be open to some sort of verification that is also automated before the system could be realised. Users were equally inconclusive in their views on how trustmarks might be brought to their attention when visiting a website. A means of setting user-preferences for things like whether and how prominently a label was displayed, was, however, widely supported.

Overall, the survey results showed support for the QUATRO concept and the project team feel that this will improve once demonstrators are available for people to see and understand how QUATRO works in practice. These will be ready by the first quarter of 2006.

QUATRO RDF Schema for common elements of quality labels

QUATRO has published a vocabulary intended to be useful to a wide variety of trustmarks. This is expressed both as a simple set of descriptors with supplementary definitions where necessary, and as a machine-processable RDF schema.

The vocabulary is in 4 sections. Section one covers general criteria such as whether the labelled site's publisher is easily identified, whether a privacy statement is provided etc. The vocabulary makes specific provision for the labelled site to be declared to meet legal practice in defined territories and to what extent it meets the W3C Web Accessibility Guidelines.

Section two of the vocabulary supports labelling schemes that are designed to give assurance on the accuracy of information provided, such as medical information sites, while section 3 focuses on eCommerce. In the final section, a set of descriptors are provided that are likely to be used by a trustmark scheme operator internally such as the date on which a label was issued, when it was last reviewed etc.

The vocabulary has been designed to be as flexible as possible to that each individual trustmark can use the parts that apply to their particular scheme. The vocabulary itself, complete with definitions, is at www.quatro-project.org/vocabulary/1.0/.

A description of the schema is published at www.quatro-project.org/vocabulary/1.0/schema-description/.

The machine-readable schema is published on the Persistent URL of http://purl.org/quatro/elements/1.0/ that resolves to the schema.

The IQUA Trustmark Scheme

The IQUA trustmark scheme uses an emblem (IQ) that can be seen by users of the webpage. This trustmark confirms that a page complies with a series of requirements, which in IQUA's case, are quite broad. To obtain the IQUA trustmark a page must be accessible, have minimum usability criteria and provide for secure transactions. Contents (which must be identified according to date and author) must be suitable for minors, and must also comply with effective legislation on data protection and electronic commerce. IQUA has awarded around 400 trustmarks to date.

These requirements have been drawn up by all IQUA-attached members, which shows their clear commitment to self-regulation.

The current trustmark scheme

The IQUA quality trustmark is both a ".gif" image installed on the webpage of the member organisation and a link to the IQUA database, where the following data is stored:

- Name of the organisation that bears the trustmark
- Address
- Telephone No.
- Fax

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- E-mail
- Initial date of verification of the webpage
- Trustmark expiry date

There is also a note that encourages users to notify IQUA's e-ODA (office for the e-public defence) in the event they detect non-compliance with the quality requirements on the webpage.

Verification and certification of compliance with the requirements is done by IQUA. Nevertheless, the organisation upon whose webpage the trustmark is installed agrees by contract to comply with the IQUA code of practice.

In order to check that a webpage complies with the requirements, IQUA has developed a set of tools that allow us to verify some indicators and carry out the certification process in an orderly fashion. Hence for example, IQUA has developed programs to check whether a webpage is to be found in the prime positions on the main search engines. IQUA can also analyse texts, the standard of spelling, or broken links. This, together with tools developed by third parties (e.g. programs to check webpage accessibility) provide for faster certification.

Contacts

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Coming Next ...

First quarter 2006 - annotated search results from major search engines highlighting sites with quality labels.

The QUATRO Partners

Coolwave UK-based E-media company, providing website and database technical support.

ECP.NL (Platform for eNederlands). An independent platform consisting of both public and private organisations dedicated to the development of the Netherlands information society. Leads the policy research of QUATRO.

ERCIM (European Research Consortium for Informatics and Mathematics). The European host of the W3C provides a direct link between Quatro and the W3C's Semantic Web Activity.

ICRA (Technical Co-ordinator). Leading international content labelling system. Backed by major internet companies around the world.

IQUA (The Internet Quality Agency). Barcelona-based quality labelling scheme with links across Europe through Euro-Label.

NCSR (The Greek National Centre for Scientific Research). Knowledge engineering and artificial intelligence experts.

Pira International (Project Co-ordinator). UK paper, packaging, print and publishing consultancy, providing training, information services, conferences and publications for these industries.

University of Milan (UNIMI - Department of Computer Science and Communication). Research interest in permissioning systems, database management.

Web Mèdica Acreditada (Official Medical Association of Barcelona). Barcelona-based medical review and labelling organisation.