



at THE CENTRE FOR  
HEALTH PROMOTION  
UNIVERSITY of TORONTO

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**W**elcome to our fall edition. In this issue we are taking a look at the question “Is the Internet a positive force in health promotion?” Here, as a starting point, are some thoughts on this dynamic issue.

Let’s consider access, quality and evaluation. Access is a familiar concern. If it requires expensive and sophisticated hardware, software and education, use of the Internet can increase inequities. Quality is a problem because non-experts place information on the Internet of dubious value and experts put out all kinds of information that isn’t appropriate or relevant. Evaluation presents the usual difficulties: those in power want to know the benefits relative to the costs in a clear straightforward manner and this is often difficult to determine.

## The Internet A positive force in health promotion?

But are these really important issues? Here are three possible answers.

The first is yes, they are important issues for the reason cited above.

The second is yes, they are important issues but they won’t be as serious in the near future. The convergence of computers and television, market forces and technological advances will open the Internet to anyone willing to expose themselves to massive advertising. New search engines, such as [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), and well publicized gateway sites, such as the *Canadian Health Network*, will lead literate consumers to quality information. And as for evaluation, new software and hardware make it easier to monitor and report on outcomes.

And the third possible answer is no. The real issue is what to use the Internet for – information delivery, networking or building community participation? Or all of these things and more.

So is the Internet a positive force for health promotion? As you can see, any answer leads to more issues. That is, in part, the nature of any evolving new technology. Each practitioner needs to decide what’s best for their initiative. To help you do this, we’ve rounded up the most current opinions, tips and resources from THCU staff and guest writers.

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# Internet News

When I come home at night and find that I have over 60 e-mails to answer (many of which demand immediate responses), I am often tempted to disconnect my computer and return it to wherever I got it. I'm sure many of you have had the same feeling. That is, we probably all have doubts about whether or not the Internet is a positive force in the promotion of our own health; surely, this intrusive demand on our time and concentration can't be good for us!

On the other hand, when I think about what the Internet has done for communication and networking in health promotion and what its potential is, there is little doubt that it is a positive force in the field of health promotion. Never have we been able to share pertinent information about health promotion with such speed and accuracy as we can today though the Internet. Moreover, there is a great deal more that we could do using this tool. In particular, we are just at the beginning of our use of the Internet as a vehicle for distance learning and I think we will see rapid strides in this direction in the next few years. It also can be a very effective and

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For about five years I have been encouraging people in the field of health promotion to use the Internet as a tool for communicating and organizing. The emerging electronic venues of the Internet, e-mail and intranets have opened new opportunities for health promoters. We can now reach wider audiences with our messages, search for resources and services, and collaborate with others across enormous distances at low cost.

One example of using the Internet to reach wider audiences includes the use of Websites for providing health information (see [www.canadian-health-network.ca](http://www.canadian-health-network.ca)) and notices of programs, workshops and services (see any Public Health Unit Website or others listed at [www.web.net/~stirling/onphuweb.htm](http://www.web.net/~stirling/onphuweb.htm)).

As one of the first activities that health promoters do on the Internet is search for information, resources and materials-good and timely sources of health promotion related research are vital. One example of a research source is the weekly Ontario Health Promotion Email Bulletin (see

efficient tool for carrying out projects. For example, it was an enormously helpful tool in carrying out the work of the *WHO-EURO Working Group on Health Promotion Evaluation* which I chaired (mostly from my basement computer). Virtually the entire 23 chapter book was assembled over the Internet! It has even been suggested by Shawn Chirrey in an article in the OHPE Bulletin that it can be a community development tool. Thus, we can expect the value of the Internet for health promotion to increase over time.

At the same time, we must not forget that most of us are privileged by having the resources and skills to access the Internet. There are many who don't and won't likely have in the near future. Thus, we have a responsibility to help those who are "Internet deprived" to gain the access they need and want. Only in this way can the Internet become a positive force for all in health promotion.

Irv Rootman  
Director, Centre for Health Promotion

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[www.opc.on.ca/ohpeflyr.htm](http://www.opc.on.ca/ohpeflyr.htm)) which provides news and resources.

The most accessible ways that people have found to use the Internet are e-mail, list-serves and email discussion lists – good introductions to the Internet and excellent meeting spaces for discussing the field and practice of health promotion. These technologies are changing the ways that we work, our communications strategies and relationships. Nancy Milio states (1992: 216),

It is not information technology [IT] that binds people to work toward community ends. It is the process of using and molding IT for human purposes that can help to create healthy communities.

Alison Stirling  
Health Promotion Consultant  
Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse

# Proposed Standards for Health Promotion Internet Resources

The following is based on information from *Health Promotion Criteria, Section III: Proposed Standards, February 1999*, prepared by the Centre for Health Promotion on behalf of the Canadian Health Network.

The list at right identifies the key standards that all health promotion Internet resources across Ontario should meet. These standards are quite different from the criteria one normally uses to assess the quality of a resource or health information. Usually, standards are written from an information science point of view and cover quality control in a very traditional way. These are designed to address health promotion values and the infrastructure and depth of a site. "... the process of engaging the site or resource should be health promoting itself."

## Audience

- It provides material to populations of interest.
- It promotes to population of interest.
- It lowers barriers caused by technology, literacy level, etc.

## Alignment of content with health promotion approaches

- The proposed solutions are multi-level, holistic, intersectoral.
- The problem definitions reflect broad determinants of health at multiple levels.
- There is concern for marginalized, disadvantaged groups.
- There is emphasis on opportunities and strengths, as well as problems and gaps.

## Process

- It provides information.
- It provides opportunity to build virtual communities.
- It teaches or supports generic skills (advocacy, letter writing).
- It provides opportunity for feedback.
- It incorporates community wisdom.

## How the sponsoring organization manages itself

- There is meaningful participation of key stakeholders, explicit sensitivity to power differentials.
- There are ethical practices in purchasing, hiring.
- There are productive partnerships.

## Correction

Sorry! In the last edition of the Update (Spring 1999), we accidentally omitted part of an article. If you are interested in reading the rest of the article about THCU's consultation on *Legislation Guiding Ontario Health Units* (from page 3), please contact Noelle Gadon at 416-978-0522.



# The Evaluation File

## Evaluating Health Related Websites – Let the Surfer Beware!

Since the mid 1990s, many people have turned to Internet Websites to learn how they can improve their health and prevent disease. According to the *Interactive Services Association*, a trade organization representing the interests of on-line service developers, an estimated 58 million adults in Canada and the United States are accessing health information from the Internet.

The Internet has proven to be an invaluable means of disseminating health-related knowledge and ideas. A major limitation of this medium, however, is the lack of a formal process for assessing the accuracy and quality of information provided on health-related Websites. As a result, there is no assurance against health information that may be biased, misleading, or, at worst, result in health-damaging consequences if acted upon.

To address this deficit, the *Office of Health Promotion at Emory University* has developed a valid and reliable instrument to critique the credibility of health-related Websites. The *Health-Related Website Evaluation Form* was designed for health educators and

clinicians who refer their clients to Websites as an additional source of health-related information.

The form contains 36 rating items sorted into eight content areas: Website information, content, accuracy, author, currency, audience, external links and structure. Ratings items include:

**Content** The information covered does not appear as an “infomercial” (i.e., an advertisement disguised as health education).

**Accuracy** Sources are clearly documented.

**Author** The site is sponsored by or is associated with an institution or organization.

**External Links** Links are current enough to account for changes in the field.

Respondents rate each item according to a three-point scale (0 - N/A; 1 - disagree; 2 - agree). The total score provides the overall Website rating. Websites are assigned one of three possible ratings: excellent (at least 90% of total possible points); adequate (at least

75% of total possible points) or poor (less than 75% of total possible points).

The *Health-Related Website Evaluation Form* is a promising means of assessing the plethora of health information on the Internet. Ideally, the form will serve as the basis for a standardized rating system to guide the choices of informed consumers. Unfortunately, such a system will not put an end to misleading health information on the Internet. In an unregulated medium, some consumers will continue to gravitate towards Websites matching their own biases and assumptions. As Socrates noted, “belief is more powerful than the truth.” Resources like the *Website Evaluation Form* protect the informed surfer from fiction dressed up as fact.

For permission to use the instrument for a class or professional training, please contact Leslie Teach at [let3@cdc.gov](mailto:let3@cdc.gov). Copies of the instrument are available at [www.sph.emory.edu/WELLNESS/index.html#index](http://www.sph.emory.edu/WELLNESS/index.html#index)

Brian Hyndman  
THCU

# Web Based Resources

For those who are just beginning the journey into cyberspace, we recommend a resource developed by the *Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse*. "Getting connected: an online start up guide" is available at [www.opc.on.ca/CAPC/index.html](http://www.opc.on.ca/CAPC/index.html).

"Principles for the provision of health advice" (on the Internet) are provided by the *Health on the Net Foundation* within their *Code of Conduct*. The eight principles address such things as confidentiality, sources of information, evidence base and policies related to advertising. It can be found at [www.hon.ch/HONcode/Conduct.html](http://www.hon.ch/HONcode/Conduct.html).

The *HPiC Website News Bulletin* is compiled every two weeks. It provides a gateway to health promotion related Websites and can be accessed at [www.hea.org.uk/hpic](http://www.hea.org.uk/hpic). HPiC is the *Health Promotion Information Centre* at the *Health Education Authority* (HEA), London, UK. For more information about the HEA please visit their Website at [www.hea.org.uk](http://www.hea.org.uk).

One exemplary site which offers some of the best in access and interactivity is QuitNet – a program of the Boston University School of Public Health at [www.quitnet.org/](http://www.quitnet.org/). Here there are many user tools and quizzes and very strong user forums.

There are some great resources regarding the use of the Internet in health promotion and health communication in the archives of the weekly *Ontario Health Promotion Email Bulletin* (OHPE).

- ▶ Issue 64.1 is a feature on *Health Promotion and Information* by Shawn Chirrey. He identifies several key resources, and offers to provide a 20-page detailed bibliography of articles to anyone who is interested. He can be contacted by email at [s.chirrey@utoronto.ca](mailto:s.chirrey@utoronto.ca), or by phone at (416) 978-7543.

- ▶ Issue 117.1 is another feature on *Global Health, Infectious Diseases, and Civil Society Networks* by Ron Deibert. He discusses the potential of the Internet to engage citizen participation, particularly in response to global issues. "To date the majority of applications of IT in the field of health promotion have tended to focus on two areas: providing resources for professionals and as a source for health infor-

mation/education materials for consumers and communities. These types of applications are obviously needed and useful for those that access them. Nonetheless, I think they do not take full advantage of perhaps the most exciting feature of the Internet – the interactive capabilities open to the general public." He also warns that quick information access by concerned citizens and professionals is no substitute for the "real thing:" addressing the preconditions which give rise to the severity of health issues in the global world.

- ▶ In 123.1 Simon Mielniczuk examines the development of on-line communities for health promotion and other special interests. "One of the first principles of community work is to appreciate the community as it is, and these new virtual communities are changing our very understanding of the word community." In 123.2 several resources on using the Web for health promotion and community organizing are provided.

- ▶ And finally, 103.1 is dedicated to an evaluation of the OHPE bulletin itself. In 103.2, resources for using electronic bulletins and doing on-line networking are provided with details on how *The Health Communication Unit* and the *Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse* can assist in these activities.

Information on the archives of past OHPE Bulletins is available at

[www.opc.on.ca/ohpe/ohpeflyr.htm](http://www.opc.on.ca/ohpe/ohpeflyr.htm)

or

[www.utoronto.ca/chp/hcu/ohpe.html](http://www.utoronto.ca/chp/hcu/ohpe.html)

If you do not have access to email or the Internet, please contact THCU.

## Don't forget ...

Don't forget to visit THCU on-line! In addition to descriptions of our events and consultation services, you'll find resources to download and a comprehensive collection of links. And if there's something you'd really like to see on our site that we haven't added yet, don't hesitate to let us know at [hc.unit@utoronto.ca](mailto:hc.unit@utoronto.ca)





# Print Resources

Lorraine Telford & Nancy Dubois, THCU

Blake Poland, Department of Public Health Sciences, University of Toronto

Health communication on the Internet: an effective channel for health behavior change? Cassell, M., Jackson, C. & Chevront, B. *Journal of Health communication*. Vol. 3 1998. Pages 17-79.

Interpersonal communication has been shown to be successful in influencing attitudes and changing behaviour. The Internet has promise as a new interactive channel, and the authors of this article take a look at how using the Internet in this way can enhance the effectiveness of health promotion efforts.

The authors point out that most practitioners view the Internet as merely another channel, albeit with impressive reach and storage capacity, and overlook the opportunity for immediate, transactional feedback. They assert that the Internet “constitutes a hybrid channel with attributes of interpersonal and mass communication” (p. 72).

The authors highlight the unique opportunity to use the Internet to change attitudes, as this is a precondition for persuasion and ultimately behaviour change, and many other channels are unsuitable for this type of intervention. Because Internet interaction can be cyclical and over time, interventions can easily accommodate stage-based interventions. Visual and auditory cues can also be used to assist those with low-literacy levels in understanding and retention.

Although the authors focus on lifestyle-oriented changes as the major example of application, the principles they discuss can be adapted to the full range of health promotion interventions. They make a strong argument for better and more research on the use and effectiveness of the Internet as an interactive channel. This is a realistic and useful discussion about the Internet as an interactive tool for health promotion.

Does Web advertising work? Memory for print vs. online media. Sundar, S. Shyam, Narayan, Sunetra, Obregon, Rafael, and Uppal, Charu. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. 75 (4), Winter 1998. Pages 822-835.

Research on the use of the Internet as a communication tool (as compared to other vehicles) is still scarce. One simple study by Sundar et al. (1998) is a rare example. In this study 48 people who were split into control and experimental groups were exposed to news information and advertising on-line and print, respectively. Controlling for story content memory, etc. they found print ads were recalled better. Their discussion highlights the important psychological differences in the processing of stimuli transmitted by different media.

*The state of the net: the new frontier*. Clemente, P. (1998). New York: McGraw Hill.

This is a complete reference about the Internet market and its user population – of critical importance to health promoters working with specific populations. The author states that the goal of the book is to present a clear picture of today’s Internet users—who they are, where they live, what they’re doing on-line, and what motivates them to go online. There is a discussion about reaching users effectively.

The Health-Activated, Health Responsible Consumer. Ferguson, T, M.D. (1991). In A.M. Rees (Ed.) *Managing Consumer Health Information Services*. Oryx Press.

In this chapter, Tom Ferguson describes the difference between passive patients, concerned consumers and health-activated, health-responsible consumers. He asserts that the health-active, health-responsible consumer is leading us into a medical reformation that will involve, among other things, a “health information explosion” and an “explosive growth” in the use of computers as tools to provide ways for people to take charge of their own health.

*Health promotion and interactive technology: theoretical applications and future directions*. Street, R., Gold, W. & Manning, T. (1997). (Eds.) . New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

This text is divided into three sections including theoretical perspectives, the use of technology and the future of interactive technology for the promotion of health. One highlight of the text is a chapter by one of the most respected authors in health communication, June Flora (along with Rajiv Rimal).

*Hosting Web communities: building relationships, increasing customer loyalty, and maintaining a competitive edge*. Figallo, C. (1998). New York: Wiley.

This book includes discussions about the many key aspects of hosting Web communities effectively. It emphasizes the importance of knowing who is using the Web and why, so that information can be tailored to the users. The application of interactive elements such as chat platforms, discussion lists and news lists, are also discussed in detail. Figallo says “you’d better be willing to understand the motivations that drive people to seek each other on line, and you’d be wise not to seek instant success. Communities are a great use of the Web, but they require a lot of care and attention.”

A realist in the midst of Internet early-adopters! We like that.

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**In brief ...**

Using interactive computer games to increase the skills and self-efficacy regarding safer-sex negotiation: field test results. Tomas, R. Cahill, J., Sanitlli, L. (1997). *Health Education and Behaviour* 24 (1) p. 71-86.

On line computer networks: potential and challenges for community organizing and community building now and in the future. Cart, C. (1997). In M. Minkler (Ed.) *Community organizing and community building for health*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Using behavioural theory in computer-based health promotion and appraisal. Rhodes, F., Fishbein, M, Reis, J. (1997). *Health Education and Behaviour*, 24 (1) p. 20-34.

*Engines of empowerment: using information technology to create healthy communities and challenge public policy*. Milio, N. (1996). Chicago: Health Administration Press.





# Workshops

## Introduction to Evaluating Health Promotion Programs

*December 15 & 16, 1999*

*Braz King & Barb van Maris, Smaller World Communications*

This workshop provides participants with the knowledge and skills to select and design the most appropriate evaluation for a health promotion project. At the end of the two-day workshop, those attending will be able to: contribute to the design of a comprehensive evaluation, based on an understanding of health promotion, the specific context and stakeholder interests; select the right evaluation methods for a specific project; and interpret and critically assess evaluation results.

## Special Topics Workshop—Day One

*January 20, 2000*

### Morning Session: Fear Appeals in Health Communication

*Kim Witte, Associate Professor, Michigan State University, Department of Communication*

This session presents guidelines for designing and evaluating fear appeals, supported by an overview of current research and real-life examples. Topics covered include: what is meant by fear appeals, a newly developed fear appeal model that explains both failures and successes, the construction of effective fear appeals, the effect of various levels of fear on the receivers' attention (attitude, behaviour change, etc.) and how to design and evaluate fear appeals with culturally diverse audiences.

### Afternoon Session: Evaluation & Stakeholders

*Charles Salmon, Associate Dean for Graduate Education and Research, Michigan State University, College of Communication Arts and Sciences*

This session considers the relationship between objectives, communication campaigns and evaluation as seen through the eyes of various stakeholders, as well as examples of what is and is not easily measured and interpreted. We will also consider that which is overlooked—the unintended effects which can raise serious ethical issues for health communicators.

## Special Topics Workshop—Day Two

*January 21, 2000*

### Morning Session: Overview of the Uses of the Internet in Health Promotion

*Jean Marc Dupont, Principal & Roch Denis, Director of Informatin Technologies, The Alder Group*

This session introduces participants to the use of the Internet as a communication tool. Topics covered include: demystifying the Internet; the effective use of various applications from email to discussion groups and mailing lists; and a look at higher level web-based functionality including project management, database management and multimedia streaming.

### Afternoon Session: Program Planning Models: A Comparison of Common Approaches

*Nancy Dubois, Consultant, The Health Communication Unit*

This session takes a critical look at the relative strengths and challenges of three common program planning models and will offer participants the opportunity to apply these concepts to actual programs. The application will address the types and stages of program development as well as the degree to which evaluation is included in each model.

## Media Advocacy

*February 15 & 16, 2000*

*Nancy Dubois, Consultant, The Health Communication Unit & Special Guests*

Media advocacy is the process of working with the media to influence healthy public policies through shaping debate about the topic. Successful media advocacy ensures that issues include a public health perspective, emphasize the social, cultural, economic and political dimensions of health problems, and stress the importance of participation and empowerment in health promotion. The workshop will provide a recommended process, many tips and strategies, and media representatives will share their advice.

For more information, please visit the Website, see the enclosed flyer or contact Noelle at telephone (416) 978-0522.