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*Crystal Mark, Clear Mark and Write Mark: assessing websites’ clarity and usability across three English-speaking countries*

Thirty-five years have passed since Chrissie Maher shredded official documents outside the Houses of Parliament in London and began her fight against the use of over-complicated sentences and legalese, thus giving birth to the Campaign for Plain English. Since then, the plain English movement has grown especially in English-speaking countries, even if “it took a little longer before plain language principles began to penetrate the legal sphere” (Williams 2005: 169). The present study aims to carry out a comparative analysis to investigate the criteria used in different countries (the UK, the USA and New Zealand) to assess the clarity of language and the usability of institutional and governmental websites which have committed to adopting Plain English and to employing more user-oriented web editing techniques. The evaluative criteria in the three countries, in addition to “people’s choice” surveys, reveal that nonsensical and unintelligible texts justify the presence of booby prizes such as the “Golden Bull”, the “Kick in the Pants” and the “Foot in the Mouth” in the UK, the “WonderMark” in the USA, and the “Worst Brainstrain Communication” award in New Zealand. However, the winning awards and document quality marks now function as controllers and markers of hundreds of documents, multimedia materials and websites, thereby auditing the quality across many large organizations and institutions. In this research, a selection of institutional websites from the three countries will be taken into consideration in order to ascertain whether and to what extent reader-focused uncomplicated communication and user-friendly layout and design succeed in countering gobbledygook and in transforming bureaucratese into clear, intelligible and straightforward texts.