CountryWatch

The Arm-Chair Travelers Database

Review Date: 19 April 2016

Overall Score (Weighted Total)	★★★★★

Content — 40% (Quality, Uniqueness, Reliability, and Appropriateness for community college audience)	3
Interface — 25% (Usability, customization, mobile supported, lack of problems)	3
Cost — 15% (Value)	5
Accessibility — 15% (Compliance with standards)	2
Support — 5% (For administrators and users)	3

CountryWatch is an easy-to-use database centered around in-depth reports of each country in the world. Ideal for geographical, political and cultural research, CountryWatch should be a frequently-used resource on most campuses. However, at present some shortcomings give us pause and until they are addressed CountryWatch cannot be fully endorsed by the reviewers. It's good! But is it academically good? Let's see.

Method

Two reviewers with previous experience using CountryWatch with students spent dozens of hours focusing on the interface, navigation, features and especially the content of the database. We also reached out to the publisher with a list of questions to shed additional light on the resource, but didn't receive a reply prior to the review being published.

_____

<u>Review</u>

Introduction

CountryWatch content is applicable across the curriculum, from political science to horticulture courses. Reports are well-written and substantive in that they're authoritative yet written at a high school and community college reading level. Country reports are organized collections of web pages, but they can also be viewed and printed in an in depth PDF report. PDF reports are commonly 200-300 pages and some are more than 400 pages long.

The free version includes access to the Country Overview sections, including a basic overview, forecasts, key statistics and some maps of each country. The standard paid version, meanwhile, provides access to detailed reports on each country with the following sections: political, economic, investment, social, and environmental, all organized by sub-categories. Council of Chief Librarian member libraries have access to the standard paid version. Unfortunately source material used to create the reports is not cited in a standard fashion, leaving users unsure of content origin and reliability. This is a flaw for any resource, and especially an academic database.

In addition to the standard material included in each report there are a number of helpful data points, such the political risk index which provides comparable rankings for each country based on a common set of criteria. Supplementary content also includes regional and country-wide maps that are available for each country, as well as thematic, physical and political maps. The maps are detailed and well-liked by students, however they lack publication dates, leaving their currency unclear. The standard paid service also includes access to CountryWire, with daily news coverage for all countries from Reuters news service. Some news stories – such as those found in the political intelligence wire section – are written by CountryWatch staff. Authorship of other news content – such as political intelligence briefings, is less obvious and would be enhanced with clear bylines and formatted citations.

Finally, as of early 2016, CountryWatch doesn't support keyword searching, which was disabled because it didn't function properly. This is a shame, especially for paid subscribers as searching across modules would be useful.

Interface

The CountryWatch homepage provides access to the various features and modules through the links in the header. Links to modules that aren't included in a user's subscription will lead to a paywall. Across the top of the header is a running newswire with links to stories in the

_____

CountryWire and Political Intelligence Wire modules. The quickest way to access country reports is through the gold "Select a Country" button on the bottom right of the header. (CountryWatch doesn't currently support search functionality.) Below the header are featured items from the main content areas, starting with a featured country report and CountryWire news item.

The gold "Select a Country" button leads to an alphabetical list of country names and corresponding flags. From here users can quickly access an html version of any country report. Country reports have tables of contents along the left side of the screen that are divided into categories sub-categories, allowing users to quickly jump to any section of interest. Near the bottom of each table of contents is a link to a PDF version of the report. CountryWatch doesn't provide a method of emailing reports or other materials from within the database, but users could download the PDF version then attach it to an email composed in an outside program.

CountryWatch reports are updated on an annual schedule, although more frequent updates are possible if conditions warrant. Reports don't include a prominent publication date, but according to the publisher the date at the bottom of the Political Conditions section can be taken as a proxy publication date.

CountryWire and Political Intelligence Wire are frequently updated with content available from the previous 24-48 hours. In contrast, some of the content promoted via the running news banner included dated stories, such as President Obama's visit to Cuba more than a week after it ended and a CountryWatch energy report released more than seven months previously.

Mobile-friendly

When accessing CountryWatch on a small screen users get a small version of the regular website without a mobile-specific display. This is challenging as CountryWatch pages include a lot of content and the reports are text heavy.

Accessibility

According to AChecker, a web accessibility evaluation tool, the CountryWatch homepage has 42 known problems, including numerous images with missing alt tags and insufficient contrast between text and background color. AChecker identified an additional five likely and 236 potential problems, such as overly complex page structure and a lack of keyboard functionality. The reviewers did not have access to the Videos module, but videos available through the regular paid subscription were not closed-captioned.

Support

CountryWatch offers users basic support tools, including a Frequently Asked Questions page and a toll free number for technical and customer support. However, one reviewer called the support line and left a message, but was never called back. A three-page PDF document billed as a step-by-step guide provides an overview of the main sections of CountryWatch, not detailed instructions.

Cost

In addition to limited content available for free, CountryWatch is available via a variety of subscription levels: Standard, Premium, Elite or Suite. California community colleges with current Council Of Chief Librarians memberships receive free standard access that can be supplemented with the purchase of additional modules. These modules include Videos,

Elections Central, and Political Intelligence Zone. The reviewers did not have access to these modules.

The Competition

Other resources that focus on global content include Europa Worldbook, ProQuest's CultureGrams, Gale's Global Issues In Context and Facts on File's World News Digest. The reviewers didn't have access to Europa Worldbook, but CountryWatch appears to provide more comprehensive coverage for each country than CultureGrams or World News Digest. Global Issues in Context provides substantial content on each country, albeit largely as a portal to various news and other articles.

In addition to comparing CountryWatch to other databases with global content, the reviewers also thought it important to look at another database that uses a similar "Report" layout. CQ Researcher is one such product and it has a number of similarities to CountryWatch in addition to the format. Both resources provide comprehensive coverage of the country or topic they're covering and both are well respected in their fields. CQ Researcher has some functionality that CountryWatch doesn't have, such as a strong keyword search ability. Another difference pertains to citing source material. As previously noted, sources used in CountryWatch reports are not cited in a standard fashion. In contrast, CQ Researcher does an exceptional job consistently citing all sources, an important consideration for academia.

Recommended Improvements

The reviewers suggest the following enhancements would make CountryWatch a better, more useful resource:

- Adding clear and consistent citations to source material throughout the reports as currently source material isn't regularly cited and there are no publication dates on maps. While a blanket citation statement exists, specific citations following a common citation format would greatly enhance the usefulness of the material in an academic setting.
- Provide dynamic citation functionality for reports and specific sections within reports. A citation example is provided, but it isn't specific to a given report. Dynamic citation functionality is commonly available in research databases and would be a welcome improvement.
- Confirm content accuracy. For example, the title entry for Southern Sudan, which is used instead of South Sudan or Republic of South Sudan, the names recognized by the United Nations and the U.S. Department of State. Source citations are especially important for uncommon information.

- Provide site administrators with greater flexibility to configure the interface. For example, the CountryWatch store offers reports for $99 and up even to authenticated users who have free access to the same reports. Subscribers should be able to configure their interface to hide the store or direct users to free reports.

<div style="border:1px solid black;padding:1em;">

Conclusion

CountryWatch is a great resource for finding detailed information about each country in one place. The information presented is overwhelming, but organized in an effective manner. The biggest issue for the reviewers was the lack of citing any sources within the reports themselves. CountryWatch content is amazing and we still tell students this is a favorite database. However, we just wish the citations and dates on the maps were better so it could be stronger for academia.

</div>