The Contribution of Virtual Forums to Locating and Focusing Information/

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Abstract

The modern world advances regularly while we must be aware of the various technological novelties, and know how to use the new tools available to us. Electronic discussion groups are one example for such a tool that can contribute a lot in social communication and especially in the information area.

This research presents a virtual forum as an information retrieval tool, containing a new kind of interaction between human-computer-human. Such an interaction comes about when two other kinds of communication combine: face to face communication and an interaction between a human being and a computer (the computer makes the information available and provides the availability of communication everywhere and at any time).

This research's hypotheses tend to assume that a virtual forum may contribute both to the process of information retrieval and to personal communication. At the same time they examined the respondents' attitude towards the most important characteristic of virtual communications – anonymity and its impact on the quality of the information. Various researches on virtual forum show anonymity as a dual characteristic, for some of them describe it as a prominent advantage encouraging virtual communication and participation in it, and some of them describe it as disadvantage. For the purpose of testing the hypotheses the research has chosen a population which included experts (professionals and graduates) in the information area in order to get the professional opinions concerning the tool's potential. The questionnaire has been specifically adopted for this research by basing itself on the professional review of the subject. The questionnaire examined to what extent are informants satisfied by their participation in the virtual forum. At the same time, the research has examined their opinions concerning the contribution of interpersonal communication at the forum to the information enrichment of the participants, and the hypotheses has been that such

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an interaction enables the applicant to receive diverse opinions and viewpoints in response to his question, thus enriching his knowledge. As in previous researches, the perception of informants concerning the anonymity of virtual communication has been examined, whether they see it as contributing to the quality of information, or on the contrary, as diminishing it. At the end of the survey 86 valid questionnaires has been collected.

Analysis of the findings shows that the hypotheses have been found valid, the active participants were satisfied, because of their participation in the virtual forum. Another point, informants believe that interpersonal communication which finds place at the electronic discussion groups does enrich the participant's knowledge. Concerning the impact of the anonymity of the information's quality, the respondents have been at two minds, while the findings show a positive tendency.

The conclusions point at the necessity to raise the awareness of the capabilities inherent in the virtual forum and to encourage participation in it both for professional needs – developing different expertise areas by creating new ideas, a creation that grows out of a collective consciousness with implications on society at large – and for personal information enrichment and self awareness.

The full potential of this tool, which is capable to contribute a lot to society, must be realized.

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