Relevance judgements in information retrieval

by

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies in the measurement of relevance criteria across stages of document evaluation concludes that the findings "...suggest a need for continued work to map or array relevance criteria across information search process stages, variations in document representations, tasks and contexts." (Tang & Solomon, 2001).

This thesis aims to develop such a model. In this study the attributes and manifestations of relevance as defined by Saracevic (1996) are modelled in a matrix in order to define the various relevance types more clearly. From this modelling process an array of relevance types are derived, namely algorithmic or systems relevance, topical relevance, cognitive relevance, situational relevance, socio-cognitive relevance and affective relevance.

These identified relevance types are then modelled on an existing cognitive model of information transfer, as defined by Ingwersen (1996). The Ingwersen model was utilized because it explores the multifunctional and cognitive array of representations of both the information objects, and the cognitive space of the user, both as influenced by the environment. By the re-organization of this model, the different types of relevance were shown to operate in different dimensions (and over time) of the information retrieval process. This model has the added advantage that it may be possible to specify whether relevance judgments were made during the work task or the search task execution.

The viability of this model is then indicated by utilizing the published results of two empirical studies, namely that of Barry and Schamber 1998) and Vakkari and Hakala (2000). The criteria identified in this process were then consolidated, analysed and allocated to the corresponding manifestations of relevance and relevance types as identified and modelled, excluding the more "objective" relevance types, over which the user does not have much control.
The research questions posed relate to various aspects of the model, such as the relationship between affective relevance and the other subjective relevance types, the existence of socio-cognitive relevance, the relationship between cognitive and socio-cognitive relevance and the judgements of documents within work task domains. The model was then tested, both in terms of the validity of the construct and the research questions stated. The empirical testing was done by means of questionnaires, once the work task of the respondent has been completed.

The structure of the thesis is as follows: Chapter 2 is a literature review tracing the history of relevance research as well as the multidimensional and dynamic nature and the interdisciplinary research involved. Through this overview it becomes clear that there is a need to model relevance types in terms of a more holistic approach, and therefore the development of such a model has been formulated in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 describes the construction of the questionnaires in order to test the model developed in Chapter 3. The results gathered by means of the questionnaires are presented and discussed in Chapter 5. The conclusion and discussion of the results in terms of the model developed are documented in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 reviews the larger significance of the results in terms of possible practical implementation of the findings.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. The concept of relevance within the context of Information Science

1.2. The research problem

1.3. Aims, goals and research objectives - research questions

1.4. Methodology

1.5. Outline of thesis

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction: demarcation of literature covered

2.2. Relevance defined

2.2.1. Definitions and conceptions of relevance

2.2.2. The history of relevance

2.2.2.1. Before 1958

2.2.2.2. 1959 – 1976

2.2.2.3. 1977 onwards

2.3. The multidimensionality and dynamic nature of relevance

2.3.1. The interdisciplinary nature of relevance

2.3.2. Degrees of relevance

2.3.3. The dynamic nature of relevance

2.4. Research with implications for relevance

2.5. Summary of main conclusions based on literature review

CHAPTER 3: DEVELOPING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Attributes of relevance
3.2. Manifestations of relevance

3.3. Attributes and manifestations of relevance: What are the connections?

- 3.3.1. Relation
- 3.3.2. Intention
- 3.3.3. Context
- 3.3.4. Inference
- 3.3.5. Interaction
- 3.3.6. Motivational relevance as intentionality

3.4. The modified relevance model

3.5. Some consequences of relevance variety

3.6. Relevance types

- 3.6.1. Algorithmic relevance
- 3.6.2. Topicality
- 3.6.3. Cognitive relevance or pertinence
- 3.6.4. Situational relevance
- 3.6.5. Socio-cognitive relevance
- 3.6.6. Affective relevance

3.7. The contexts of relevance judgements in the information seeking process

- 3.7.1. Social/organizational domain
- 3.7.2. Defining/perceiving the work task
- 3.7.3. The individual's cognitive space
- 3.7.4. Statement of information need
- 3.7.5. Request and request formulation
- 3.7.6. Interface/Intermediary
- 3.7.7. Information objects

3.8. Work task and search task as depicted in the model

3.9. User criteria for relevance judgments
3.10. Summary and conclusions

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1. Defining the research question

4.2. Construction of the questionnaire
   4.2.1. Length of the questionnaire
   4.2.2. Language and vocabulary
   4.2.3. Wording of the questions
   4.2.4. Sequence of the questions
   4.2.5. Types of questions
   4.2.6. Question content and selection

4.3. The questionnaire
   4.3.1. Section A: context of information seeking and use
   4.3.2. Section B: documents used to complete the work task
   4.3.3. Section C: documents retrieved and read, but not used

4.4. Sample design and sampling methods

4.5. Data collection methods

4.6. Data capturing and data editing

4.7. Data analysis

4.8. Limitations of the methodology

4.9. Summary

CHAPTER 5: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

5.1. Sample profiles

5.2. Research questions: Data analysis and results
   5.2.1. The main research question
   5.2.2. Sub-question 1
VIII

5.2.3. Sub-question 2 102
5.2.4. Sub-question 3 115
5.2.5. Sub-question 4 117
5.2.6. Sub-question 5 122
5.2.7. Sub-question 6 127

5.3. Summary of findings 136

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS REGARDING MODELLING AND EMPIRICAL DATA 138

6.1. Conclusions from the literature review 138
6.2. Conclusions regarding the model developed 138
6.3. Conclusions for future research 139

CHAPTER 7: IMPLICATIONS OF THE MODEL FOR IR RESEARCH 140

7.1. Algorithmic relevance 141
7.2. Topicality 142
  7.2.1. High order knowledge representation 143
  7.2.2. Fuzzy and parallel IR 144
7.3. Cognitive relevance / pertinence 144
7.4. Situational relevance 147
7.5. Socio-cognitive relevance 148
7.6. Affective relevance 151
7.7. Conclusions 151
APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRES 163
Section A: 164
Section B: 167
Section C: 171

APPENDIX B: COVER LETTER & LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT 175

APPENDIX C: DEGREES OF RELEVANCE WITHIN WORK TASK 178

APPENDIX D: RELEVANCE TYPES BY WORK TASK 180

APPENDIX E: RELEVANCE JUDGEMENTS BY TASK TYPE 183

APPENDIX F: THE IMPACT OF SOCIO-COGNITIVE RELEVANCE CONSIDERATIONS ON DOCUMENT USE 185
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1. A classification of matching methods 37
Figure 3.2. Cognitive model of information transfer 45
Figure 3.3. Relevance types, work task and search task in information seeking and retrieval 47
Figure 5.1. Reasons for use by work task 106
Figure D.1. Type of relevance judgements by work task 182
# LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1. Attributes of relevance ........................................... 20
Table 3.2. Manifestations of relevance ....................................... 21
Table 3.3. Attributes and manifestations of relevance ................. 22
Table 3.4. Revised table of relevance types and attributes ............ 33
Table 3.5. Barry and Schamber relevance criteria ......................... 54
Table 3.6. Vakkari and Hakala relevance criteria and subcategories 55
Table 3.7. Criteria pertaining to relevance types ......................... 58
Table 4.1. Variables to questions matrix: Section B ..................... 67
Table 4.2. Variables to questions matrix: Section C ..................... 68
Table 4.3. Codes used for relevance types in questionnaires .......... 70
Table 4.4. Relevance criteria within relevance types .................... 72
Table 4.5. Questionnaires completed ........................................ 91
Table 5.1. Summary of survey sample ....................................... 96
Table 5.2. Analysis of topical relevance judgements together with other subjective relevance types in terms of reasons for use – Question 2 100
Table 5.3. Analysis of topical relevance judgements together with other subjective relevance types in terms of reasons for use – Question 5 101
Table 5.4. Reasons for use/usefulness of document by work task .... 105
Table 5.5. Relevance judgements by task type - documents cited .... 117
Table 5.6. Nesting of relevance types by number of occurrences ..... 120
Table 5.7. Visualization of the nesting characteristics of relevance types according to empirical data 120
Table 5.8. Negative affective relevance judgements made together with reasons for document use 124
Table 5.9. Negative affective relevance judgements made together with reasons for regarding a document as useful 125
Table 5.10. Negative affective relevance judgements made together with stated knowledge of the terminology of document 125
Table 5.11. Negative affective relevance judgements made together 126
with reasons for regarding a document as useful - not cited

Table 5.12. Negative affective relevance judgements made together with reasons for not using a document 126

Table 5.13. Negative affective relevance judgements made together with relationship with the author of a document - not cited 127

Table 5.14. Impact of socio-cognitive relevance considerations on document use 129

Table 5.15. Impact of socio-cognitive relevance considerations on the non-use of documents 129

Table 5.16. Cognitive relevance judgements made in conjunction with socio-cognitive relevance regarding academic standards of documents 132

Table 5.17. Cognitive relevance judgements made in conjunction with socio-cognitive relevance regarding viewpoint congruence of documents 132

Table C.1. Reasons for use/usefulness by work task and degree of usefulness 179

Table D.1. Relevance types by work task 181

Table E.1. Relevance judgements by task types – documents cited 184

Table F.1. The impact of socio-cognitive relevance considerations on document use 186
"Relevance will serve its purpose, but will decline as the realization slowly comes that an individual's information need is so complex ... The gradually increasing awareness of a human's incapability of stating his true need in simple form will tend to pull the rug out from under many IR system evaluation studies which will have been done in the meanwhile." (Doyle, 1963)

"Our understanding of relevance in communication is so much better, clearer, deeper, broader than it was when information science started after the Second World War. But there is still a long, long way to go." (Saracevic, 1975)

"We consider the pursuit of a definition of relevance to be amongst the most exciting and central challenges of information science, one whose solution will carry us into the 21st century." (Schamber et al., 1990)

"Relevance is a necessary part of understanding human behaviour. The field should be encouraged by commonalities across perspectives, not discouraged by disagreements. Relevance presents a frustrating, provocative, rich, and - undeniably - relevant area of inquiry." (Schamber, 1994)

"Nobody has to explain to users of IR systems what relevance is ... People understand relevance intuitively." (Saracevic, 1996)