"Quero saber, mas não quero saber": Information Avoidance and Related Phenomena in an Age of Ubiquitous Information

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Resumo

"Os homens, por natureza, desejam saber", disse Aristóteles há 700 anos. Grande parte da pesquisa social, e talvez toda a pesquisa de sistemas de informação, assume que as pessoas procuram ativamente informações para resolver questões particulares. No entanto, sabemos que as pessoas podem evitar informações se prestar atenção a elas puder causar desconforto mental. Muitos conceitos psicológicos são relevantes para a decisão de não aprender, reconhecer ou agir sobre factos desagradáveis: repressão, negação, evasão, distração, escape, exposição seletiva, de consistência cognitiva, de enfrentamento, de gestão de terror, de gestão de incerteza, e navegação incerteza, para citar os rótulos mais proeminentes. Como é que cada um destes conceitos se relaciona com uma decisão, ou tendência, de não procurar informações? Quais são as implicações para os seres humanos que procuram informação para fazer escolhas nas suas vidas diárias?

Este artigo discute a história do pensamento sobre prevenção, principalmente na disciplina de psicologia, mas também na ciência da informação, comunicação, saúde, gestão, ciência política e das artes. A relevância do ato de evitar nos estudos de comportamento informacional humano é explicada, ou seja, como ela se encaixa com outros temas e práticas investigadas por cientistas da informação. Uma ênfase especial é dada à pesquisa em medicina e saúde pública, onde muitos

Abstract

"Men, by nature, desire to know," said Aristotle 700 years ago. Much of social research, and perhaps all of information systems research, assumes that people actively seek information to address particular questions. Yet we know that people may avoid information if paying attention to it might cause mental discomfort. Many psychological concepts are relevant to the decision not to learn, acknowledge, or act upon, uncomfortable facts: repression, denial, avoidance, distraction, escape, selective exposure, cognitive consistency, coping, terror management, uncertainty management, and uncertainty navigation, to name the more prominent labels. How do each of these concepts relate to a decision, or tendency, not to seek information? What are the implications for humans looking for information to make choices in their daily lives?

This paper discusses the history of thinking about avoidance, mainly in the discipline of psychology, but also in information science, communication, healthcare, management, political science and the arts. The relevance of avoidance to studies of Human Information Behavior (HIB) is explained, that is, how it fits with other topics and practices investigated by information scientists. A special emphasis is given to research in medicine and public health, where many studies show that avoiding threatening information is a common way of coping. The presentation concludes with some

estudos mostram que, para evitar informações, o risco é uma forma comum de enfrentamento. A apresentação termina com alguns conselhos práticos para a nossa própria vida, como cada um de nós se pode tornar mais consciente da nossa tendência para escapar a realidades desagradáveis, e em vez disso usar o feedback para melhorar o nosso conhecimento e desempenho.

practical advice for our own lives—how each of us can become more aware of our tendency to escape unpleasant realities, and instead use feedback to improve our knowledge and performance.

Palavras-chave: Evitar informação; Informação ubíqua

Keywords: *Information avoidance; Ubiquitos information*

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1. Introduction

Research about human needs, seeking and use of information is historically one of the main areas of research in library and information science (Case, 2012). Forty years ago, these kind of studies generally fell under the label of "information needs and uses," and later "information seeking." Now we refer to them with the broader title of "Human Information Behavior" (HIB), which includes a variety of other thoughts and actions. Early studies of information seeking assumed that it was almost always intentional – e.g., going to a library to read about historical facts, or talking to another person to learn the latest stock prices or interest rate. Correspondingly, most information seeking research tended to focus on the benefits of acquiring facts, and the most-cited models of the information seeking process (e.g., Kuhlthau, 1993, and Wilson, 1999) say little about why a person might not seek information even when they recognize their ignorance about a topic. The idea of "selecting" messages naturally emphasizes the information that is selected, not that which is ignored. It is assumed that people want to know; searching for answers is a natural aspect of being human.

Yet it is widely recognized that some types of information are not found intentionally. For example, we can come across information by chance, as in an advertisement or an overheard conversation that turns out to be very relevant to us. This kind of serendipity, or accidental encountering of information, is of interest to information scientists, too. The growth of social media has increased interest in sharing of information, as have studies in

healthcare, where we find that people often conduct searches of medical literature on behalf of others. And more recently, we have become concerned with cases in which people ignore or avoid information. Perhaps "avoidance" is the most unusual of the topics found in HIB research. This paper considers the history of thinking on this topic, discusses its common outcroppings in everyday life, and why it is important for all of us to think about.

As a psychological concept, avoidance goes back more than a century. And its roots in western literature go back much further than that. This article discusses its history in psychology and psychotherapy, and the many terms that have been used to describe it, e.g., coping, distraction, escape, repression, and supression. Examples are given from two domains: health, and feedback on, or evaluation of our performance. Finally, we will consider what advice we can take away from the many studies on this topic.

2. Avoidance in the History of Psychology

Most of our practices assume that individuals seek sources of information. This assumption is deeply embedded in Western culture, at least as far back as Aristotle's statement (circa 330 BC) that "all men, by nature, desire to know" (Aristotle, 1979). For this reason perhaps the emphasis in information seeking, has tended to be on active acquisition of information, e.g., "surveillance of the environment". Most models of information seeking also tend to focus on the benefits of acquiring data. As in Aristotle's time, it is assumed that people *want to know;* looking for information is a natural aspect of being human.

Yet it has also long been noted that knowledge comes at a cost – a notion embedded in the Biblical story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and found also in the book of Ecclesiastes (1:18: ". . . he who increases knowledge, increases sorrow").

In the discipline of psychology, we could trace the roots of the Avoidance notion back to William James (1890). James discussed our ability to focus our thoughts and attention, and also how thoughts might be led astray. But surely much more influential were the early works of Sigmund Freud (1923/1962). Freud's work is sometimes thought of as antique and irrelevant (Westen, 1999). Yet some of the psychological tendencies Freud identified from listening to patients have considerable face validity. It is his theory of underlying motivations that appears speculative, and at times at odds with what we observe about human behavior.

We cannot observe constructs like the Id or superego, or even Freud's notion of unconscious repression, but we *do* notice what people say, and don't say. And experiments by later psychologists (e.g., Wegner, 1994) on the conscious suppression of thoughts found this to be possible, although not always successful.

Another early explorer of the avoidance concept was Harvard psychologist Henry Murray (1938). He thought we had a need to avoid failures and performance related information that might harm our self-regard, a tendency he called "infavoidance." I will return later to this idea of negative feedback of our performance.

In the 1940s, psychologists continued to study *why* and *how* we avoid certain thoughts or facts. Hyman and Sheatsley (1947) saw it as an intentional *selection* of some stimuli rather than others. They observed that humans tend to seek information that is congruent with their prior knowledge, beliefs and opinions, and to avoid exposure to information that conflicts with those internal states. They called this "selective exposure" to info. This need for consistency (in thought, and perhaps in emotion as well) sparked several decades of psychological research on cognitive dissonance.

The psychologist Leon Festinger (1957) demonstrated that under certain circumstances people prefer to seek out information consonant with their knowledge. Such preferences differ by the seriousness of the situation, and whether there is an opportunity to do something about it. There are now close to a thousand studies on cognitive dissonance, and it is still investigated. Cognitive dissonance is now used to explain why patients sometimes ignore test results, or advice from medical doctors (e.g., Steckelberg & Mühlhauser, 2007).

Research on "fear appeals" considered another possibility: purposeful rejection of information. In experiments during the 1950s, Janis and Feshback (1953) found that extreme attempts to frighten people into doing something, were not very effective. Information about possible threats creates tensions in the minds of audience members, who must in turn find some way to resolve the tension. If the threat is extreme, or if any potential responses are not expected to be effective, then an attractive alternative is to ignore the threat entirely. Later the psychologist Abraham Maslow (1963, p. 111) noted that "we can seek knowledge in order to reduce anxiety and we can also *avoid* knowing in order

to reduce anxiety." He recognized that sometimes we would rather not know that we are at high risk for failure or might have a serious disease.

Another psychologist, George Miller (1978), commented on the effects of "information input overload" on the individual, and noted that it had a relationship to schizophrenia. Individuals who suffer from this try to escape or withdraw in some way, when they feel threatened by too much information. But is avoidance triggered by a situation that a person faces, or is it a permanent trait?

Susan Miller (1979, 1987) viewed avoidance as a trait characteristic, possessed by some people more than others.   The scale she developed measures tendencies to monitor environmental information, versus avoiding it (e.g., through distraction); she called the latter tendency "blunting". Blunting turns out to be harder to measure than monitoring, as was recently demonstrated in a New Zealand study of children who were afraid of dentists and dental pain (Williams & Jones, 2013). Because monitoring and blunting are tactics for "coping" with threats, Folkman and Lazarus (1980) included avoidance in their "Ways of Coping" psychological assessment. Similarly, therapeutic handbooks identify a behavior called "avoidance coping" or "escape coping".

The unusual yet widely-cited "Terror Management Theory" says that what we do and think about is fundamentally caused by our desire to stay alive (Pyszczynski, Greenberg & Solomon,1997). We *know* that we will die one day, and so we do anything we can to avoid thinking about that. The inevitability of death is the "terror" to which the theory refers. The theory says that we have three types of motivations: *direct Biological* motives (attaining necessities like food); *Self-expansive* motives oriented toward the growth of our behavioral and cognitive competencies; and *Symbolic-defensive* motives (controlling existential terror, as through psychological distractions). Avoidance is found among the Symbolic-Defensive motives; at that level we develop "pursuits," such as quests to become enlightened or rich, or to correct some injustice in the world, or simply to practice an engrossing hobby or sport.

Abraham Maslow, mentioned earlier, is famous in the field of Management for his "Hierarchy of Needs" that places "Physiological Needs" at the base and "Self-Actualization" at the top. Terror Management Theory is a similar hierarchy. Pyszczynski and his colleagues see goals and behavior as organized in a hierarchical manner, with abstract goals at the top

and concrete behavior at the bottom. The goal of one behavior becomes the means through which the next abstract goal is met. They use the example of visiting a library to illustrate the first step of an eight-part chain of goals: we go to a library in order to study for an exam, so that we may complete a course, in order to obtain a university degree, so that we may pursue a career, thus demonstrating our intelligence, which in turn enhances our self esteem -- all of which actions temporarily distracts us from thinking about death.

3. Avoidance in Other Disciplines

Beyond psychology there are other disciplines in which avoidance is an important concept. For example, the disciplines of information science and communication have both been heavily influenced by the idea of uncertainty reduction, as found in Claude Shannon's (1948) so-called "Information Theory." Rutgers University professor Carol Kuhlthau, for example, emphasizes that "uncertainty due to a lack of understanding . . . initiates the process of information seeking", even while acknowledging that information does not *always* reduce uncertainty. The assumption to seek knowledge is embedded in such theories of uncertainty reduction*,* as scholars like Bradac (2001), Brashers (2001) and Sorrentino (2000) have pointed out. Much of the literature on uncertainty reduction emphasizes either the *benefits* (particularly long-term) of having new information (e.g., for assessing one's self, or planning future behavior), or rather the costs of information (e.g., being forced to acknowledge threats or personal failings).   Few theorists consider both costs and benefits in their examples. Bradac, in particular, argues that people do not always reduce uncertainty, by exploring situations in which we may deliberately increase uncertainty.   Avoiding information is thus a subset of the uncertainty-increasing strategy.

Uncertainty Management Theory (Brashers, 2001) and related concepts (Bradac, 2001) questions the assumption that humans are always reducing uncertainty. The theory offers a more sophisticated way of explaining avoidance because it considers both costs and benefits of having information.   It shows why how people sometimes deliberately *increase* uncertainty. Uncertainty Management Theory says that uncertainty is experienced "not simply as an uncomfortable tension demanding reduction" (Bradac, 2001, p. 463) but as feelings and cognitions that can be managed in other ways; these strategies may include seeking ambiguity and even confusion. It helps us cope with stress, and to manage

relationships with others. For example, we are not always completely honest with our friends, if we think our frank opinion will hurt their feelings.

What does the theory mean by strategically increasing uncertainty? Two examples of the deliberate increasing of uncertainty are found in situations where a physician must deliver a threatening diagnosis to a patient. One party to the dyad, the physician, might choose to provide a less-threatening (i.e., less certain) message when they believe the patient is expecting bad news, so that the patient will not "lose hope." The patient, in turn, might ignore the diagnosis in order to maintain a positive outlook, or even seek out conflicting information. In both cases increased uncertainty might actually provide some increase in comfort for the patient, even though in a way that might compromise their treatment (Brashers, Goldsmith & Hsieh, 2002).

4. Two Situations in Which We May Avoid Information

So, when is it that we most tend to avoid information?" Psychological researchers have looked at two main examples: Threats to health, and threats to self-esteem. The first example is illustrated when we are told that we (or those we love) have a deadly disease, or that we/they should quit doing something dangerous (like smoking or using illegal drugs). The second example is even more common, as when we are given feedback about our performance at work, or in some other task, e.g., a sport.

An important factor in shaping our response to the first example is called "Proximity to Disease." By "proximity" is meant: Are we the one who is threatened, or is it a loved one, or rather someone not as close to us? It is somewhat paradoxical that the person most threatened with a deadly disease usually does *less* information seeking (Degner & Sloan, 1992). The threatened person often becomes paralyzed with fear. Fortunately in these cases a friend or relative often steps forward to help, by investigating possible treatments, and so forth. In many cases it is an older, female relative who looks for information on behalf of the patient.

Rubenstein's study (2008) offers some typical findings about patients who have visited a clinic for cancer testing—a situation that Sweeny and Cavanaugh (2012) say requires "uncertainty navigation". While waiting for diagnosis, over half of patients report anxiety or

fear. This may seem justified, but remember that these are people who have not yet been diagnosed, and many will not have cancer. About half of patients say they distract themselves by watching television, reading, or engaging in other activities that help them avoid thinking about possible disease. Over one-third did not seek any Information about the disease or about treatment for it. Of those who *did* seek information, nearly all search the Internet, and about half ask their friends or relatives for advice.

There are many other examples of health-related avoidance. Here are just a few: About ten percent of users of a consumer health library say that looking for information makes them *more* anxious (Pifalo, Hollander, et al., 1997). Studies find that many patients are not interested in treatment information, unless they had the same treatment previously (Degner & Sloan, 1992). This latter finding goes along with a general rule that those with higher levels of experience are more accepting of threatening information (Cassileth, Volckmar & Goodman, 1980). And, about one-third of patients and their spouses will simply not discuss a cancer diagnosis, the potential for recurrence of cancer, or the possibility of dying (Zhang & Siminoff, 2003)

Yet it is probably more common simply to reject an opportunity to decrease uncertainty, rather than to intentionally increase it. An information science researcher, Pam Mckenzie (2003), discusses the case of pregnant women who would rather not know the gender of their child, and/or whether the child may possibly have (or run a high risk for) a disease. Their refusal to ask for or accept such information from their physician often stems from a conscious decision not to place themselves in a position in which they may need to make difficult choices (e.g., abortion) – or, in the case of determining gender, simply wish not to spoil a "surprise" at birth.

Genetic testing has raised a number of issues about avoiding information (Case, Johnson, et al. 2004). Genetic tests are very popular for two purposes: Giving advance warning of possibly inherited health risks; and in helping establish family lines in genealogy, especially where names have variant spellings, and immigration has separated family lines (Case, 2009). In the latter case a small percentage may discover that some siblings are not closely related genetically, indicating a possible love affair outside of marriage. This presents difficult issues to family historians: who can they tell about this? Who really wants to know?

We all have experience, from a very young age, with hearing feedback from our parents and teachers about our behavior and performance in tasks. Later we receive more evaluations at our jobs. Often we did not like to hear this kind of information. Do you enjoy being evaluated at work? I doubt that you do.

There have been many decades of experience with different ways of giving feedback to employees about their performance on the job. While some methods work better than others, most reports agree that there are two common problems with formal evaluation: First, supervisors sometimes avoid giving honest feedback to the employee. They "manage uncertainty" by being vague, or avoiding too much criticism, or simply treat the evaluation as ritual that simply must be done. Second, the subordinate is likely to be defensive. They don't like hearing criticism – especially because they cannot do anything to change their past performance. This creates cognitive dissonance that is often resolved by rationalizing that the evaluation is unfair or biased. We have all heard or experienced such complaints about the evaluation process.

When we look at creative work, we can see another type of avoidance: Complete rejection of feedback. The novelist Ernest Hemingway supposedly said: "Do not read your critics. If you believe them when they praise you, then you must also believe them when they criticize you. Negative reviews will undermine your self-confidence, and self-confidence must be preserved at all costs." Not reading reviews is a rule followed by many authors and performers. For example, the American actor, Paul Newman, claims that he never read a single review of any of the films in which he appeared (Skvorecky, 1997).

The reports on employee evaluation and creative artists are in sharp contrast to what we know of coaching of professional athletes. Perhaps because there is fame and money involved, as well as other motivations and circumstances, we find a different pattern among the best athletes. Many of them welcome feedback and criticism, especially at the early stages of their career, because they are highly motivated to improve their performance. There have been many psychological studies that show that those athletes who are able to hear and respond to advice tend to do better, and that this is correlated with other psychological factors, such as self-efficacy and self-confidence. Of course, there are also

physical limits to performance, and a wide variation across athletes in their capabilities. So ability to learn from feedback will not overcome a lack of strength or skill – it simply helps.

Information and communication technologies also play a role. Perhaps the strongest influence is that they create many more opportunities to escape than existed before. Mobile phones, particularly smart phones, are perhaps the most common way to escape now. Some people are compulsive about their phones. You have probably been in a group meeting where at least one person is paying more attention to their phone than to the other people in the room. In their minds, they are somewhere else.

Of course, there are many more entertainment possibilities in our world now, too. We can spend an entire day watching amateur films on YouTube, or old television shows on Hulu. It is an effective way to distract ourselves from thinking about other problems.

In the United States we have separate channels (TV news, radio talk shows, and websites) for liberal versus conservative viewpoints. Thus, we may listen only to the news and interpretation with which we already agree. Will future citizens be able to talk to one another, much less solve problems, without a common basis of understanding?

5. Practical Conclusions

So what can one take away from this article? Here are some suggestions. It may be common sense that we should ask for help, but under stress we may not have the energy to do so. Imagine that you are going to the doctor to get what you feel may be a negative diagnosis. Ask someone to go with you to help you remember what the doctor says, and to help you follow up on finding additional information (Johnson & Case, 2012).

Studies show that it is experts in a domain who make effective use of, and even welcome, criticism. Most novices often do not want to hear criticism, as they are so aware of their weak performance that it threatens their self-esteem. We see this in our working environments, just as I have seen it in mentoring young professors who receive poor teaching evaluations in the university. Negative feedback may be rejected as "invalid" for various reasons (Sweeny & Cavanaugh, 2012). Increased experience makes it easier to accept constructive criticism rather than reject it.

Finally, we all need to be aware of our tendency to avoid certain information. I mean this in a personal sense, and on a professional level. Individually, we can ask ourselves: Am I ignoring or avoiding something? Have I made excuses that allow me to blunt criticism, or avoid threatening information? Am I looking for things to distract myself? It is difficult to make this a habit, however. Perhaps this is most important for those of us who are educators. In order to teach others, we must also understand the reasons and circumstances that prevent them from listening to, or accepting, new information. We all know that there are times and situations in which are minds are closed. This is the dark side of learning. And that is why avoidance is a topic of great interest to teachers, information scientists, psychologists, and others.

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