



cmu.edu

Information Avoidance: How People Select Their Own Reality

Carnegie Mellon University

Monday, March 13, 2017

By Shilo Rea

Image of a woman covering her ears

We live in an unprecedented "age of information," but we use very little of it. Dieters prefer not to look at the calories in their tasty dessert, people at high risk for disease avoid screenings and people choose the news source that aligns with their political ideology.

Drawing on research in economics, psychology and sociology, Carnegie Mellon University's George Loewenstein, Russell Golman and David Hagmann illustrate how people select their own reality by deliberately avoiding information that threatens their happiness and wellbeing. In a paper published in the *Journal of Economic Literature*, they show that while a simple failure to obtain information is the most clear-cut case of "information avoidance," people have a wide range of other information-avoidance strategies at their disposal. They also are remarkably adept at selectively directing their attention to information that affirms what they believe or that reflects favorably upon them, and at forgetting information they wish were not true.

"The standard account of information in economics is that people should seek out information that will aid in decision-making, should never actively avoid information, and should dispassionately update their views when they encounter new valid information," said Loewenstein, the Herbert A. Simon University Professor of Economics and Psychology who co-founded the field of behavioral economics.

"But people often avoid information that could help them to make better decisions if they think the information might be painful to receive. Bad teachers, for example, could benefit from feedback from students, but are much less likely to pore over teaching ratings than skilled teachers," Loewenstein said.

Even when people cannot outright ignore information, they often have substantial latitude in how to interpret it. Questionable evidence is often treated as credible when it confirms what someone wants to believe — as is the case of discredited research linking vaccines to autism.

And evidence that meets the rigorous demands of science is often discounted if it goes against what people want to believe, as illustrated by widespread dismissal of scientific evidence of climate change.

Information avoidance can be harmful, for example, when people miss opportunities to treat serious diseases early on or fail to learn about better financial investments that could prepare them for retirement. It also has large societal implications.

"An implication of information avoidance is that we do not engage effectively with those who disagree with us," said Hagmann, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Social and Decision Sciences. "Bombarding people with information that challenges their cherished beliefs — the usual strategy that people employ in attempts at persuasion - is more likely to engender defensive avoidance than receptive processing. If we want to reduce political polarization, we have to find ways not only to expose people to conflicting information, but to increase people's receptivity to information that challenges what they believe and want to believe."

Despite the consequences, information avoidance isn't always a mistake or a reflection of a lazy mind.

"People do it for a reason," said Golman, assistant professor of social and decision sciences.

"Those who do not take a genetic test can enjoy their life until their illness can't be ignored, an inflated sense of our own abilities can help us to pursue big and worthwhile goals, and not looking at our financial investments when markets are down may keep us from selling in a panic."

The researchers believe understanding when, why and how people avoid information can help governments, firms and organizations reach their audiences effectively without drowning them in unwanted messages.

Related Links:

[Journal of Economic Literature: Information Avoidance](#)

[I don't want to know: Why do we avoid certain information and what are the consequences for our society?](#)

[George Loewenstein and the NEW New Economics of Information](#)

[CMU Launches First-of-its-Kind Major in Behavioral Economics, Policy and Organizations](#)

[Infinite Career Paths in Behavioral Economics](#)