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Rethinking information practices to embrace avoidance: everything old is new again

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Abstract

Introduction. We respond to Hicks et al.'s (2025) call to reconceptualise information avoidance free from the assumption that avoiding information is necessarily negative, denialist, or non-compliant. This allows us to consider what people actually do with information and why they act the way they do.

Method. We purposively selected cases from published literature that illustrate the interplay between what library and information science researchers have previously dichotomised as 'seeking' and 'avoidance' practices.

Analysis. Through secondary analysis, we reinterpreted these exemplars using Hicks et al.'s (2025) new perspective on information avoidance as practices that moderate information.

Results. We identified four complex intertwining of information practices that moderate information flow and access through both expansion and contraction: taking control of information flow; encountering, managing, or using information on one's own terms, at time and place of their choosing; keeping secrets: revealing or sharing information on one's own terms, at a time and place of one's own choosing; and protecting privacy and resisting surveillance.

Conclusion. Reframing information practices allows us to understand how people may engage in deliberate, active, and effortful practices to moderate and regulate information flow and access. These practices coexist and are both expansive and contractive.

Introduction

The conceptual language of information practices says much about the research being undertaken in our field. The dominant concepts of information seeking, sharing, and use emphasise active, intentional, and formal information interactions over passive, accidental, serendipitous or informal ones.

This assumption arises from the historical antecedents of information research, which has traditionally been informed by studies of information production and dissemination. However, as we integrate more humanistic accounts of information practices, this premise, and the way it encourages certain ways of thinking about information practices, requires constant attention. In this paper we use information avoidance (Hicks et al., 2025) as a case study to show how new conceptual vocabularies can alter how information practices are seen and understood.

Literature Review

What we call things matters. This is not a new claim, with Dervin, for example, spending considerable time and effort in the 1990s emphasising verb-ing as a practice over noun-ing (e.g., Dervin, 1993).

A particular reason to care about how we label practices is that conceptual labels may carry elements of judgment and bias. For example, in our review (Hicks et al., 2025), we proposed that information avoidance, as a conceptual term (Ruthven et al., 2025), has been treated negatively as an information practice.

We proposed two reasons for this: Firstly, there is a tacit assumption in the avoidance literature that information is associated with extractive value (Costello & Floegel, 2020) and is therefore automatically useful, of long-term benefit, deriving from knowledgeable authorities, and capable of resolving problems. Avoiding information is therefore to avoid the benefits that it brings. Secondly, people who avoid information are thereby engaging in irrational or emotionally-led thinking as opposed to more logical approaches to information seeking and use. Famously described as a pathology (Bawden & Robinson, 2009), avoidance is therefore associated with disordered thinking and with behaviours such as denial or non-compliance, themselves terms which are negatively loaded and from the perspective of the information provider.

As we (Hicks et al., 2025) have argued, however, this view of information avoidance fails to consider what people actually do with information and why they behave in such ways; that avoidance is embedded in a complex set of information practices; that those avoiding information may be making considered judgments about what information to accept; that avoidance may be shaped by systemic marginalisation and stigmatisation; and that avoidance may arise from prosocial and/or self-care motives.

From our review, we proposed a new perspective on information avoidance that sees it as 'practices that moderate interaction with information by 1) reducing the intensity (amount and/or flow) across multiple levels of granularity; 2) restricting engagement with or control over information, whether actively, passively, or receptively, and/or 3) excluding information based on relevance, quality, and timeliness criteria'.

Method and Analysis

In this short paper, we build on and apply our earlier work (Hicks et al., 2025) in a proof-of-concept demonstration. We returned to the published information practices literature to seek a small set of cases that illustrate the interplay between what library and information science (LIS) researchers have previously dichotomised as 'seeking' and 'avoidance' practices. We looked back on the dimensions we identified in our ARIST review and identified candidate exemplars that we felt offered interesting insights into the complex interplay between practices considered 'avoidant'

and those considered 'seeking'. From this candidate list, we selected four cases that together illustrate the diversity of this interplay. We sought to represent a variety of populations and a variety of forms of information practice (e.g., seeking, sharing, use) and we sampled purposively to achieve this goal.

Through secondary analysis, we reinterpreted these exemplars to reveal the complex interplay of information practices that moderate information flow and access, through both expansion and contraction. Our analysis of our selected cases therefore offers an example of how we might think holistically about information practices as comprising moderating strategies that both increase and reduce the intensity of information, permit and restrict engagement with or control over information, and include and exclude information based on relevance, quality, and timeliness. This is the first step in an ongoing and more systematic analysis.

Results

Taking control of information flow

People may engage in safeguarding information practices to control and mitigate risks in complex information environments. In their study of information literacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, Lloyd and Hicks (2021, 2022) found that many participants reacted to the overwhelming intensity of information distributed across platforms, media, institutions and social networks. Information overload and resistance against the accelerated and continuous exposure to information and viewpoints led many to slow down information updates, for example, by checking news only at specific times of the day or turning to local news only. Other strategies helped to limit 'noise', for example, deleting apps or inventing rules to limit media consumption and information exchange with friends, here mirroring the information holiday behaviour identified by Brashers et al. (2000). Participants ignored information and government recommendations, like downloading a test and trace app, that went against their beliefs or emotional and health-related needs. They disengaged from knowing by not looking up potentially relevant information if the result would restrict their independence and freedom. This enabled them to focus on engaging with information that was worth the attention and relevant:

I became overwhelmed... what I decided to do was [to] focus on the information that I need to know, I just started to compartmentalise stuff and only look at stuff that was particularly relevant to me, which was how to keep safe (Lloyd and Hicks, 2022).

As the case shows, the long-term mode of crisis and accelerated information dissemination during the pandemic fostered new and agentic forms of safeguarding information practices that helped to actively limit, moderate, and control the flow of information.

Encountering, managing, or using information on one's own terms, at time and place of their choosing

People regulate or manage their interaction with information when facing prolonged periods of stress, for example related to health issues. Caregivers of chronically ill loved ones such as people with dementia demonstrate another distinctive form of information avoidance. In a study exploring the information practices of caregivers of older adults and the role that information plays in the care process, Shaked (2022) found that caregivers regulate their exposure to information as a mechanism of emotional regulation and uncertainty management. Knowing that the disease will inevitably worsen, they acknowledge but compartmentalise this information, opting to 'save it for later' when the next phase of the illness arrives.

I try not to think too far ahead. I know the information [about future stages of dementia] is there, but I sort of don't want to know what lays ahead of us. I try to deal with one thing at a time, like in stages (Shaked, 2022).

Postponing the interaction with stressful information that might become relevant in the future is a coping mechanism that enables caregivers to maintain a sense of control and focus on immediate needs. Caregivers are aware that the information exists but engage in 'deal with that when we get there' when confronted with future care decisions, aiming to find a balance between awareness and psychological preservation (Taylor et al., 2023). This example illustrates timeliness-based information avoidance (Hyldegård et al., 2024), a decision to postpone engagement with future-oriented information. Rather than a lack of awareness, this strategy represents a strategic moderation of interaction with information over time, whereby caregivers actively manage when and how to interact with information depending on its timeliness: its relevance to the progression of the illness.

Keeping secrets: Revealing or sharing information on one's own terms, at a time and place of one's own choosing

People may keep secrets for the benefit of the person from whom the secret is being kept; for example, when planning a surprise party. A secret-keeper may perceive a secret to be protective, such as when a parent delays telling a child about a stressful appointment until shortly before it occurs. Chatman (1990, 1992) showed how keeping secrets also benefits the secret-keeper, allowing them to curate how they are seen by others and maintain some control over their own lives. This is a particularly relevant strategy for people facing systemic marginalisation, such as those Chatman studied, whose ways of knowing are not treated as authoritative; whose information and information spaces can be lost or erased (e.g., Wagner & Kitzie, 2025); who encounter systemic barriers when seeking to access the authoritative information they want; who may be the recipients of unwanted information, advice, and direction; and whose lives and activities are frequently surveilled, resulting in increased risk of unwanted intervention (e.g., Gibson et al., 2023). The older female residents of the Garden Towers apartments took care not to disclose any physical symptoms to their children to support their wish to avoid being moved to a nursing home (Chatman, 1992). Physically shielding their lunches from their colleagues' view allowed janitors to hide the fact that their sandwiches contained no filling and to keep their poverty 'to themselves' (Chatman, 1990). Secret-keeping is illustrated by Fulton's (2019) account of how a gambler routinely intercepted incoming bills so his partner would not discover the consequences of his gambling problem:

We owed some money on the mortgage and she was under the illusion, or I had put her under the illusion, that we had lots of money and we were putting more money away than the mortgage needed and we were going to borrow for the wedding. That was the intention, so as she got the [mortgage] statement, as she was entitled to, but I just didn't intercept the postman that day, and yes, she called me out, and she said what's going on? And I said, we have no money. I have a problem with gambling. So she left (Fulton, 2019).

The participant engaged in a regular monthly cycle of information practices. Since the bill arrived reasonably predictably, he actively monitored the post during the period it was likely to arrive. For the rest of the month, there was no need to monitor. On the day the statement arrived, he engaged in active and specific information practices: he intercepted and hid only the mortgage statements. So long as he caught the day's post before his partner did, he was able to prevent her from accessing information that would negatively impact her perception of him. He engaged in these concealment practices over a long period of time, stopping only when he was discovered.

Protecting privacy and resisting surveillance

The actions that people take to protect their privacy forms yet another intriguing example of the need to reconsider our conceptualisation and understanding of information avoidance. In the following example (Haider, 2017), Person 1 defends their decision to employ the DuckDuckGo

search engine, despite its perceived inferior technical capacity, due to the company's commitment to user privacy. Originally quoted to illustrate the normalisation of Google as a default search tool, this extract can also be interpreted as a form of information avoidance as Person 1 purposefully refrains from sharing information with a search engine that they do not trust. Providing the means through which they protect their privacy, the elimination of documentary traces is also seen to be a way to resist unnecessary surveillance. A similar situation might involve choosing to discuss a sensitive topic through a face-to-face conversation rather than via email.

Person 1: If I use a different search tool [Note: different from Google] then mainly those that anonymise, like [inaudible] and so on?

Person 2: Duck Duck Go?

Person 3: It has maybe improved by now, but this is a catastrophically bad search engine.

Person 4: But why does one want to be anonymous?

Person 1: Because we live in a society which is incredibly unpleasant.

[Several lines deleted]

Person 4: And why do you think you are less surveilled if you use a different search engine?

Person 1: Because they are dedicated to anonymising and all that (Haider, 2017).

In centring privacy management strategies, Person 1's actions evidence several key dimensions of information avoidance, including a high level of engagement and control over information. Their comprehensive sidelining of other search tools further illustrates their attention to avoidance at the stage of identifying the information source, well before engaging with the content returned by the source, an approach that is noted as increasingly important in technological environments (Hicks et al., 2025, p.336). Providing a further illustration of how information avoidance cannot always be seen as a passive act (Hicks et al., 2025), characterising their actions as a form of avoidance draws attention to how research has typically centred the avoidance of seeking rather than other information activities such as sharing or using. At the same time, the emphasis that Person 1 places on the potential future consequences of their actions also points to how their actions introduce additional temporal and spatial considerations to understandings of information avoidance, including in relation to the risks of time and context collapse.

Conclusion

Our secondary analysis of these four cases demonstrates how information scholars might reframe practices beyond a seeking/avoidance dichotomy. This reframing acknowledges that people may engage in deliberate, active, and effortful practices to moderate and regulate information flow and access. They may do so for legitimate reasons such as taking steps to mitigate the intensity of information overload, maintaining control of the information they disclose to others, or filtering information based on quality, relevance, or timeliness criteria that are relevant to them. Reframing such practices as active and deliberate frees them from the stigma that has long been associated with information avoidance. More than that, this reframing shows how practices of seeking and avoidance may coexist in a single informational episode (Link et al., 2023). Going beyond dichotomising seeking and avoidance practices as all-or-nothing allows us to see the interplay between and among practices, adding more nuance to our discipline's thinking about information practices.

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