The desire for information: Blissful ignorance or painful truth?

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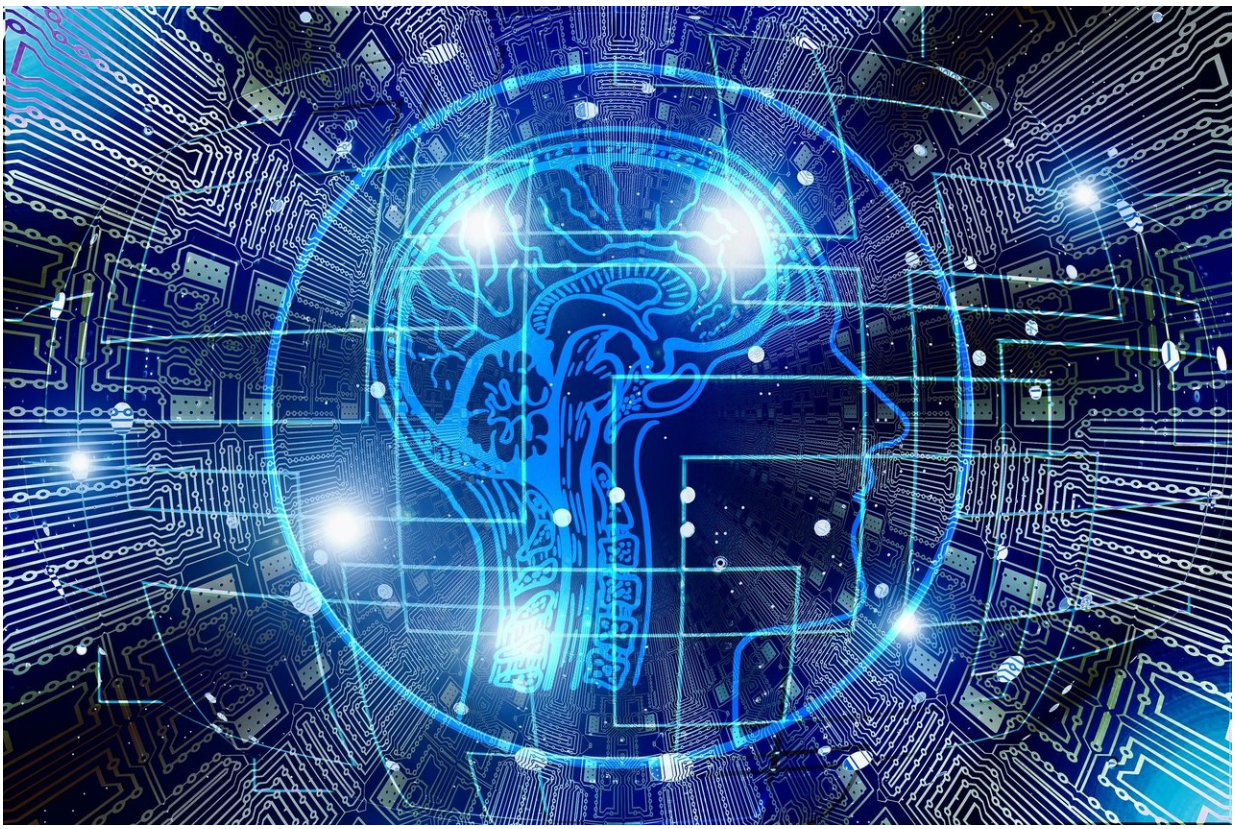

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We live in a time of unprecedented access to information. And in this era of sheltering-in-place around the nation and the globe, the desire for news may be higher than ever—at least for some people. But do we

really want all this information, all the time? Some may indeed prefer to think happier thoughts and maintain an (overly) optimistic outlook about the health threat we face. On the other hand, others may prefer not to know what the swings in the market are doing to their retirement savings.

Recent work has found that people at times prefer less information, even when this means they might not be able to make fully informed decisions. However, little is known about the prevalence of such avoidance. Who are the people who choose blissful ignorance over facing reality?

While previous work has looked at isolated decisions, researchers from Carnegie Mellon University, Northwestern and Harvard Universities set out to measure the desire for information across different areas of life. Are some people generally averse to learning information that could be painful, or do most people have some areas of their lives in which they would like to face the truth and others in which they would rather remain uninformed? To address questions such as these, and measure individual preferences for obtaining or avoiding information, they crafted 11 scenarios involving three domains—personal health, finances and other people's perceptions of oneself—in which there was information that could help the respondent to make better decisions but might be painful to learn. For each scenario, over 2,000 respondents indicated whether they would want to receive information or to remain ignorant.

"Economists have long thought 'the more, the better,' when it comes to information," said George Loewenstein, the Herbert A. Simon University Professor of Economics and Psychology at Carnegie Mellon. "This thinking doesn't fully reflect people's complex relationship with information. We wanted to create a way to measure an individual's tendency to pursue or shy away from information."

In one scenario, for example, participants had the option to learn as part of a routine medical exam the extent to which their body had suffered lasting damage from stress: a third of respondents preferred not to learn this information. And if they had gifted their favorite book to a close friend, 1 in 4 participants would rather not learn whether their friend had read and enjoyed the book.

"This work is a first step to understanding the pervasiveness and features of information avoidance in many real-life contexts," said Emily Ho, the lead author of the paper and an incoming assistant research professor at Northwestern University School of Medicine's Department of Medical Social Sciences.

The study showed that the desire to avoid information is widespread, and that most people had at least some domains, be it their health, finances or perception by others, in which they preferred to remain uninformed. The study also showed that the desire for information was consistent over time; those who expressed a preference for avoiding information at one point in time expressed similar preferences when asked again weeks later. Furthermore, how people responded to the hypothetical scenarios predicted real consequential decisions they were presented with to receive or avoid obtaining information.

Although information may feel painful in the moment, such knowledge often leads to better decisions in the future. The researchers found that people who are more impatient are also more likely to avoid learning information, preferring to avoid the prospect of immediate pain rather than make better long-term decisions. Information is also uncertain in that it can be either good news or bad news, and survey respondents who were more willing to take risks with monetary stakes were also more likely to want to learn information, risking bad news for the possibility of good news.

Were certain demographics more information-avoidant than others? "It is tempting to think that people on the opposite end of the political spectrum from you are the ones engaging in information avoidance," said David Hagmann, a fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School and a Carnegie Mellon graduate. "But we find no differences in information avoidance by political ideology, income, gender or—perhaps surprisingly—education. Trading off the potential pain from receiving bad news against the uncertain and delayed benefits from making more informed decisions is something we all seem to do."

Being able to measure people's preferences for obtaining and avoiding information has wide-ranging implications in many areas of public life, from financial decision-making to health interventions. "If there are some individuals who just won't respond to informational campaigns, and you can assess who they are, you might design a different intervention just for them," said Ho. "This can be for reducing an unwanted behavior, such as smoking, or to encourage a positive behavior, such as obtaining a vaccine or exercising regularly. Just as personalized medicine has the promise to revolutionize treatment, so can informational interventions be tailored to take into account an individual's desire for information."

The study, "Measuring Information Preferences" is published in the journal *Management Science*.

More information:
cmu.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0oYP0OROwDv1f2l

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