

Deliberate ignorance: How we avoid information and why it's sometimes useful to do so

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Christoph Engel (left), director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Common Goods and Ralph Hertwig, director at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development. They jointly explore the phenomenon of deliberate ignorance. Credit: MPG; Arne Sattler

We live in a knowledge society in which science and education is of particular importance. Knowledge is also considered a key driver for economic growth. But under certain circumstances, we all benefit from deliberate ignorance. Ralph Hertwig, Director at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, and Christoph Engel, Director at the Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods, explain why deliberately foregoing information in certain areas should even be prescribed and taught.

Mr Hertwig, why did you, as a psychologist, focus on deliberate ignorance?

Ralph Hertwig: What fascinates me about the phenomenon of deliberate ignorance is that it is contrary to a deep-rooted intuition. Human history of thought presents the idea that we are all unreservedly curious. It is therefore surprising that sometimes humans might not desire to know, and this opens up a range of questions. Is deliberate ignorance a rather rare or a frequent phenomenon? When does it occur? Why do people decide in favor of deliberate ignorance? Together with scientists from different disciplines, we have focused on these questions as part of the Ernst Strüngmann Forum and found that it is not an exotic phenomenon. Deliberate ignorance occurs in very different areas of life: in [social contexts](#), in strategic interactions and also when we try to regulate intense emotions.

Mr Engel, from a legal perspective, what role does deliberate ignorance play for social life?

Christoph Engel: The lawyer's standard response also fits here: it depends! One text book example would be the pregnant applicant. The employer knows that they must not ask about pregnancy. The applicant is even permitted to lie, if they do ask. The law disregards that hiring a

pregnant woman may be harmful for the employer, and imposes ignorance. The opposite is true in the case of product liability. A company cannot use as an excuse that it did not notice the defect of a product. It would be held liable for not checking. In that case, the law forces the acquisition and the use of knowledge.

In what situations do people decide to remain ignorant?

Ralph Hertwig: We distinguish between at least six functions of deliberate ignorance. One important function is regulating emotions. Not knowing certain facts can help us avoid negative emotions. For example, some people consciously make the decision not to view their "Stasi" (State Security Service of the GDR) files because they fear they might contain [information](#) that would make them extremely upset or sad. Such as a friend or a relative may have collaborated with the Stasi. Another function is to preserve suspense and surprise: When we read a detective story, we typically do not want to know in advance how the story ends. Then there is the function of acquiring new skills. If, as a beginner, I constantly compare myself to advanced practitioners who are necessarily better than I am, this can be demotivating. But deliberate ignorance can also be used strategically. For a minister or a business leader, it can be strategically very important to be able to say truthfully: "I knew nothing about what went on!" Like Franz Beckenbauer who said in the context of the "Sommermärchen" affair: "I always signed without reading the text." Moreover, deliberate ignorance can protect people from certain prejudices and help them to make better decisions. Finally, we can also use deliberate ignorance as an information management strategy. This strategy can, for example, help us to cope with the information overload in social media and Internet.

Can the deliberate ignorance of individuals also harm

society?

Christoph Engel: Seemingly, the answer is simple: deliberate ignorance is not acceptable if it harms others. But in a highly differentiated, interrelated society like ours, nearly all our actions affect others in some way. We therefore cannot help asking ourselves: What would have the greater impact: potential disadvantages for others or the free decision not to acquire or use knowledge?

Ralph Hertwig: To give an example, if somebody takes an HIV test and then decides that they do not want to know the result and has unprotected sex, most of us would consider this to be morally highly problematic. In this case, the person who is deliberately ignorant would accept that they might be harming others. But in the medical area, there are many complicated cases which are less clear. Chorea Huntington is an incurable, hereditary neurodegenerative disease. Meanwhile, a very good test is available to identify the existence of this genetic defect, but studies have found that only between 3 and 25% of the people belonging to the risk group actually take this test. Is this as reprehensible as the decision not to learn the result of an HIV test? I believe that most of us wouldn't see it that way. But it could mean that neither the person themselves nor, importantly, their relatives can properly prepare for the onset and the progression of the disease. If we look at it this way, the ethical implications of the choice not to know look again more complicated.

When would it be ethically correct not to acquire information?

Ralph Hertwig: One paradigmatic case concerns the attempt to contain the detrimental consequences of prejudices: How can we protect ourselves against factors that we don't want to influence our decisions?

In such cases, deliberate ignorance can protect us and even make us better people. One powerful example of this is an investigation conducted by two economists in the 1990s. It shows that one of the factors why we see female musicians in classical orchestras in considerably greater numbers today than in the past is "blind auditioning." The candidates for an opening in the orchestra perform behind a curtain and cannot be seen during their audition so that their gender and appearance cannot influence the committee's decision.

Christoph Engel: Deliberate ignorance also has an important function in the legal area. One well-known example comes from US law. Information about the defendant's criminal history must not be introduced during trial. This would be considered prohibited "character evidence." That's because criminal behavior in the past should not be used as evidence of whether the defendant committed the crime with which they have now been charged. However, in some cases the prosecutor leaks the information to influence the jury. A good defense attorney will protest against this violation of the rules. But what happens next? Normally, the judge instructs the jury to disregard this information. But there is impressive psychological evidence showing that jurors find it very difficult not to consider information they have already heard. For a fair trial it is therefore paramount to make sure that such information isn't mentioned in the first place. This is where it gets difficult for the law. What happens if somebody mentions prohibited information regardless? In my opinion, a bright line rule is in order: that person should lose their case. As a deterrent, I think this radical solution is a better option in the end than attempting to remove information which is already in the jury's heads.

What role do the internet and digitization play for deliberate ignorance?

Christoph Engel: Let's go back to the example of the pregnant applicant. Today, people leave an increasing amount of data on the web. Potential employers could, for example, gain access to their purchasing history from a supermarket chain. If they find out that a young woman has suddenly stopped buying cigarettes, but is instead stocking up on gherkins, they might suspect that the applicant is expecting a child. Of course, it would be possible to prohibit the employer from using such data in the first place. But normally, one does not have to prove the intended use before getting access to data. Alternatively, there are technical solutions preventing such conclusions from being drawn. It is possible to remove virtually any hints to the protected information from the data. But this comes at a price. The information on which the decision is based will be less accurate. For example, marketing companies will be less good in predicting the typical changes in the purchasing behavior of future parents in a targeted way. That's why legislation must consider: how much of a reduction in the quality of advertising decisions is acceptable to prevent employers from failing to hire a women because they suspect her to be pregnant?

Ralph Hertwig: I would turn this question round and ask: What role could deliberate ignorance play in the consumption of digital media? In 2018, an investigation found that false information spreads more quickly and more widely on Twitter than genuine facts. Scientists suspect that the reason for this is that false information appeals to our emotions and often surprises us and defies our expectations. And initially, everything that's contrary to our expectations is interesting to us. We need to know this! That's where deliberate ignorance can help us to build up a cognitive defense to protect us against being inundated with false information. In this sense and in this context, deliberate ignorance can become a smart cultural skill which could, for example, be taught at school.

When do you personally practice deliberate

ignorance?

Christoph Engel: I practice it all the time. I am thinking of my Research Group which I have led for 25 years now. I do not want to decide what my scientists work on. If everyone was following a master plan, our research would be sterile. Even though I haven't previously discussed this under the heading of 'deliberate ignorance,' this is a strategic decision. Research needs freedom, and my ignorance protects this freedom.

Ralph Hertwig: I also practice deliberate ignorance and often consciously. For instance, I just read an article about Marjorie Taylor Greene, a conspiracy follower who has been elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. She believes in the so-called "Frazzledrip conspiracy theory" which I had never heard of. The article said: "Don't google this, if you have a sensitive stomach." The warning was followed by a hyperlink, making me feel very tempted to click on it. At the same time, I felt really manipulated and I told myself: Time to practice deliberate [ignorance](#).

More information: Deliberate Ignorance: Choosing Not to Know. esforum.de/forums/ESF29_Deliberate_Ignorance.html

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