

'I'D RATHER NOT HAVE KNOWN THIS': A STUDY OF INFORMATION REGRET

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Would you read your late father's Stasi file?

You might avoid the information in the file.

You might avoid the information in the file.

If you access it, you might regret it.

INFORMATION REGRET

- The phenomenon where people regret having received certain information
- Information regret arises when self-protection fails, highlighting the emotional labour of living with unwanted knowledge.

CONTEXT

Information and life-changing events

- Life-changing events trigger information behaviour, and information seeking in particular (Ruthven, 2022)
- Information behaviour and the resulting information that a person encounters can trigger a life-changing event

Is more information better?

- The notion 'more information is always better' has been declared a myth (Given et al., 2023, p. 10)
- Research generally still assumes that people would be better off having information than not (e.g., severe health conditions)

Pre-acquisition vs post-acquisition stage

- People avoid or even deny information (e.g., Case et al., 2005; Foust & Taber, 2023; Link, 2022).

Information seeking and information encountering

- People receive information in multiple ways, not necessarily by actively searching for it (e.g., Erdelez, 1997).

What is known cannot be revoked

- Forgetting is not a deliberate choice.

EMPIRICAL STUDY

METHODS

A first exploratory questionnaire-based study

- 141 participants from the US and the UK, native English speakers (50% male/female)
- Administered through Prolific, January 2024

Four questions

- Q1: Please describe a concrete situation in which you found a piece of information or obtained it by any other means, but afterwards regretted having learned about it. Hint: Please write three to four sentences.
- Q2: In which year did you receive the information?
- Q3: How much do you still regret knowing this information today?
- Q4: Would your life have been different if you hadn't had this piece of information? If so, how? Hint: Please write one or two sentences.

RECURRING THEMES

Cheating



Financial problems



Crime



Health conditions



FROM THE TRIVIAL TO HIGH-IMPACT INCIDENTS

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‘Discovered a partner had cheated on me. It was a long time previous to finding out and we were happy together. It destroyed my trust and ended the relationship after a brief time of trying to make it work. If I hadn't found out, we would probably still be together.’ (Respondent 88)

INFORMATION SEEKING AND INFORMATION ENCOUNTERING

'I found out that a partner was attempting to cheat on me by reading their messages without their consent. I deeply regret it. I regret knowing the information as it didn't help my mental health or self esteem. I also regret that I read their messages without their consent, as that isn't a right thing to do.' (Respondent 81)

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‘My Dad bought me a small set of desk drawers from Ikea when I was young, like 8 or 9, and I poorly decorated it. It ended up on his study desk at some point and, when I was about 12, I was curious as to what he was using it for. I ended up pulling open all the drawers and found escort cards, condoms and lubricant.”

(Respondent 30)

SOURCES

Electronic sources

- search engines, social media, websites, ...
- actively searching on the Internet, seeing information on social media

Information obtained from other people

- other people directly offering the information, overhearing a conversation
- an accidental meeting
- watching someone without them knowing

Information found or encountered in the physical world

- looking into someone else's drawer
- reading another person's diary
- searching the physical space for something but then finding something else.



TIME AND IMPACT

'I can only think of instances where I found out information about someone, which made me disappointed in that person. It would normally be someone famous, thus tainting my enjoyment of their output.' (Respondent 16, rated 1 – low impact)

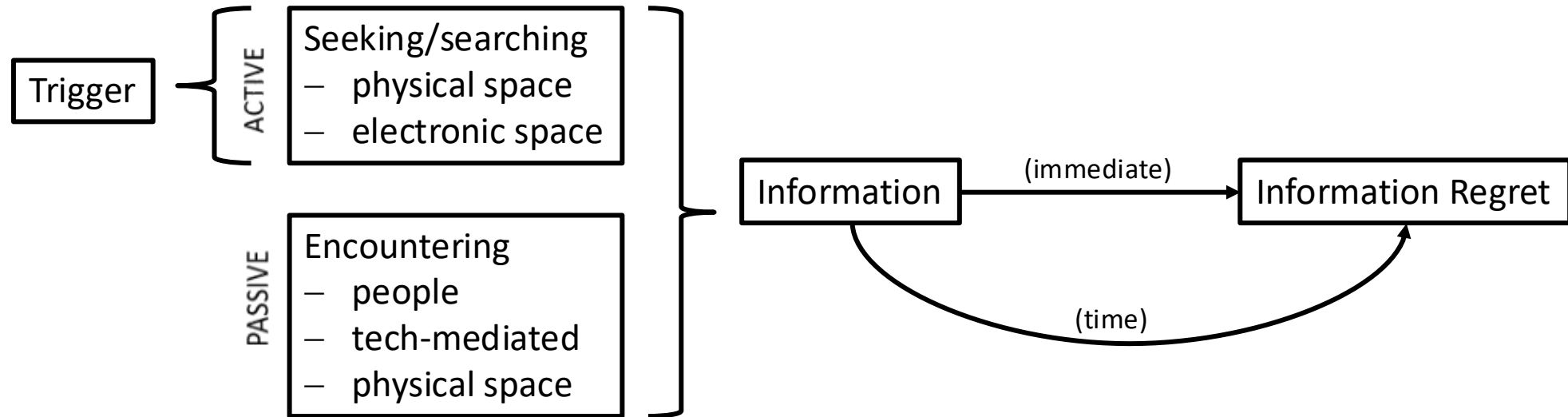
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‘It changed my relationship with [my sister-in-law] and forced me to keep a secret from my brother.’ (Respondent 83, rated 10 –high impact)

INFORMATION REGRET MODEL

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SUMMARY

Definition and Nature

- Information regret occurs after receiving (later) unwanted information, causing negative emotional or social consequences.

Irreversibility of Knowledge

- Once known, information cannot be forgotten, leading to lasting emotional effects and altered perceptions.

Range of Experiences

- Information regret ranges from trivial spoilers to life-changing revelations that impact decisions and relationships.

Challenging Assumptions

- Concept challenges the view of information as purely beneficial, highlighting potential harms and vulnerabilities.

Contribution

- A model of information regret + a first impression of information regret incidents.

Paper



Information regrets
dataset

