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'I'd rather not have known this': A study of information regret

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Abstract

Introduction. This article introduces the concept of 'information regret', which refers to the phenomenon where people regret having received certain information, challenging the typical information science view that obtaining information is always positive. This concept broadens the perspective of information behaviour research by focusing on the negative consequences experienced after information exposure, contrasting with related concepts that focus on avoidance or anxiety before seeking.

Methods. The paper provides a theoretical discussion of information regret, an emotion that arises after information has been acquired. It is contrasted with related concepts (such as information avoidance, denial, and ignorance) that occur at the pre-acquisition stage. Additionally, an exploratory, questionnaire-based study was conducted with 141 participants from the United States and United Kingdom to gain initial insight into the nature, types, and severity of information regret. The questionnaire aimed to determine the situations, time elapsed since the incident, current severity of regret, and the perceived impact of the received information.

Analysis. The analysis categorized the reported incidents by topic, source of information, and whether the information was obtained through active seeking or accidental encounter. These findings, combined with theoretical considerations, were used to derive a comprehensive model that describes how information regret arises from various information acquisition processes.

Results. The reported incidents ranged from trivial to severe life-changing events, typically revolving around infidelity, financial problems, and health, and involved both active seeking and passive encountering from personal and electronic sources. The data showed that the severity of regret is highly personal and has no correlation with the amount of time that has passed since the information was learned. Results from the empirical study inform the information regret model.

Conclusion. Information regret is a unique concept that shifts the focus of information behaviour research to the negative consequences experienced after information acquisition, demonstrating the profound and lasting impact a single piece of information can have. Future research should utilize in-depth interviews and explore the categorization of regret incidents.

Introduction

In information behaviour research, there is increasing interest in life-changing events. This line of research is particularly addressed in Ian Ruthven's latest book, which presents a theory on how people cope with life changes through what he terms 'information sculpting' (Ruthven, 2022). Furthermore, Ruthven discusses areas such as relationships, health issues, and surviving crime, where information plays a crucial role in coping with life-changing events.

Ruthven's book—and many other research studies—start by arguing that life-changing events trigger information behaviour, and information seeking in particular. In this article, I take the opposite position: namely, that information behaviour and the resulting information that a person searches for or encounters can trigger a life-changing event. While this may seem obvious, and we are aware of many examples in which people discovered some piece of information that positively changed their lives, the focus of this work is on how information can negatively impact a person's future. As Ruthven (2022 notes, 'information may reveal a situation that is more challenging than first appeared leading to a negative reappraisal' (p. 10).

This article introduces the concept of 'information regret', which refers to the phenomenon where people regret having received certain information. Information seeking or encountering, and the subsequent use of that information, can result in information regret, i.e., a person regretting having received that information. It is striking that, although information use has been explored in many contexts (Kari, 2010) and pre-acquisition phenomena like information avoidance and ignorance have been explored, the negative effects of received information have not yet been integrated into information behaviour frameworks.

Examples of having received information and regretting having gained knowledge of it range from the trivial to potentially life-changing events. Obviously, when someone watching a TV series but not having concluded it and learns of the fate of a character from that series, this falls in the former category. On the other hand, finding out about one's spouse leading a double life falls in the latter category. An example widely discussed in Germany is the effects of someone accessing their Stasi Files. These files were collected by the 'Staatssicherheit' (short: Stasi, the Ministry for State Security) in the former German Democratic Republic, which spied upon its citizens. Oftentimes, friends and family of someone of interest to the Stasi were recruited as collaborators. As the Stasi Files are open for inspection by any person for whom a file exists (and the relatives of deceased persons), people affected must decide whether they want to read their file or not. This is a classic example of potential information avoidance: Some people prefer not to know if some of their friends, family, or neighbours provided the Stasi with information about them. However, there are also cases where people have accessed their Stasi files and later regretted it. For instance, there are reports of a person regretting having seen their mother's file, where her suicide was documented in text and photographs (Gunkel, 2021).

In general, the problem is that what is known cannot be revoked. Of course, one can forget a piece of information, but that is not a deliberate choice. For instance, information that a person knows about another person cannot be not considered when evaluating that person. This problem arises in some court cases where jurors have seen news coverage that portrays the defendant in a negative light. The jury members, however, must disregard information that is inadmissible in the trial (Bruschke & Loges, 1999).

For a person to regret having received a piece of information, it does not matter whether they actively sought it or came across it in another way. However, this holds only as long as we consider information regret to refer only to the information itself, not to the process through which it was received. One can easily imagine that a person who has actively sought information they now regret having received may not only regret knowing the information but also regret having sought it in the first place. Furthermore, it is of no importance whether the information in question was

mediated through technical systems, directly revealed by another person, or found in the physical world. Again, this holds only if we consider the information itself. It is also possible that the recipient of the information blames the person who delivered it for doing so. In this article, I will solely focus on the person receiving the information. Questions related to a person revealing information to someone else, such as why people keep or reveal a secret, and their feelings about hiding information from others, are outside the scope of this research and have been discussed elsewhere (e.g., Fulton, 2019; Slepian et al., 2016).

Information regret is a notable blind spot in information behaviour research. Typically, information science views obtaining information as something positive. While the notion 'more information is always better' obviously does not hold and has even been declared a myth (Given et al., 2023, p. 10), research generally still assumes that people would be better off having information than not. At the same time, it is widely acknowledged that people avoid or even deny information (e.g., Case et al., 2005; Foust & Taber, 2023; Link, 2022). This is often illustrated with examples of severe illness, where people frequently choose not to get information that could potentially be emotionally harmful. Still, the assumption is usually that it would have been better for that person to have received the information in question, as they would then have been able to treat their illness properly and plan their life accordingly. Of course, this is not the case with information overload (Bawden & Robinson, 2009; Belabbes et al., 2023; Hołyst et al., 2024), where the sheer amount of information is overwhelming to a person and may lead to avoidance or shallow approaches to information seeking (Ford, 2015, p. 127). However, in the case of information regret, we can assume that a single piece of information can lead the person who receives it to regret having gained knowledge of it.

This article will show how information regret relates to central concepts of information behaviour research and how a focus on information regret can enrich this research field. To provide a first impression of how information regret is a phenomenon relevant to people and to identify avenues for further research, results from an exploratory questionnaire-based study on the phenomenon are presented and discussed. From the theoretical and empirical results, a model of information regrets is derived. The article closes with suggestions for further research.

Situating information regret in information behaviour research

It is evident and astonishing that information regret (or a similar concept) has not been considered in information behaviour research so far. One reason for this can be seen in the generally limited interest of the field in information use (Given et al., 2023, pp. 78-79), which is often regarded simply as the outcome of an information-acquisition process that is not further considered. A review of the relevant textbooks by Ford (2015), Wilson (2021), Bawden and Robinson (2022), and Given et al. (2023), as well as newer integrative models (Greifeneder & Schlebbe, 2022), confirm the absence of information regret or similar concepts. Therefore, one goal of this article is to bring the – in our case, negative – consequences of information into the focus of information behaviour research, adding a post-acquisition phenomenon to the extensive discussion of mostly pre-acquisition phenomena. Information regret is just one possible consequence of receiving information. Prior research has considered non-seeking behaviour and when such behaviour is unhealthy vs healthy (Manheim, 2014). Examples of when information non-seeking can be healthy include avoiding health information that would increase a person's worry, satisficing to avoid information overload, or avoiding low-quality information.

Negative effects of information and information anxiety

It is evident that one could regret having received information, even if its impact is low. Reasons for regret could be, for instance, that one wasted time reading something that was not relevant. However, we are interested in the more substantial regrets, which often are related to life-

changing events. Therefore, the question is whether and how people regret having received information that had a substantial influence on their lives.

The negative outcomes of information behaviour have been increasingly recognized as a crucial area of study, with scholars identifying various 'information pathologies' that arise from the complexities of information engagement. Bawden & Robinson (2009) discuss the 'dark side of information', encompassing cognitive and emotional burdens such as information overload and anxiety. A key question here is whether 'information regret' constitutes a distinct pathology within this framework. While much of the health information literature emphasizes positive outcomes, some studies address negative consequences on various levels (Zimmerman & Shaw, 2020). Additionally, studies such as those by Kuhlthau (2003) highlight that information seeking can lead to confusion and distress rather than clarity and reassurance, even when the final outcome ultimately leads to satisfaction. Furthermore, research on information grounds (Fisher, 2005) highlights the social dimensions of information behaviour, where the communal exchange of information may either mitigate or exacerbate negative experiences. These insights suggest that the consequences of information behaviour are multifaceted, requiring a nuanced understanding of both its beneficial and detrimental effects.

Information anxiety is about people's negative feelings towards unknown information. Research on information avoidance suggests that people experience anxiety not only when encountering undesirable information but even before they begin seeking it. Wurman (1991) introduced the concept of information anxiety, highlighting the distress individuals feel when faced with an overwhelming amount of information or uncertainty about how to access and interpret it. When individuals anticipate that acquiring specific knowledge—such as learning about a health condition—may lead to distress or negative consequences, they may choose to forgo information-seeking altogether, not out of apathy, but out of a protective instinct to avoid emotional discomfort.

Information avoidance, deliberate ignorance, and information denial

This section is about people's activities and strategies towards not receiving information. Avoiding, ignoring, or denying information can be seen as mechanisms of self-deception (Von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). However, it should be stressed that these mechanisms can also be regarded as self-protecting mechanisms, and, therefore, be perfectly reasonable: 'some information may be more harmful than the adverse consequences of any deception' (Echarte et al., 2016).

Information avoidance

Information avoidance is closely related to information anxiety, where anxiety is on the affective level, while information avoidance is on the psychomotor level (i.e., focusing on actions to avoid information). Information avoidance has been defined as 'any behaviour intended to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information' (Sweeny et al., 2010, p. 341). However, such narrow definitions focusing on negative outcomes have been challenged, most notably by Hicks et al. (2025), who offer a more nuanced definition of the concept: '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' (p. 339).

People are motivated to avoid information because 'we do not wish to, or cannot, deal with the consequences of that information' (Ruthven, 2022, p. 56). This points to the – sometimes unforeseeable – consequences of information seeking, or more broadly, receiving information. In that sense, information avoidance is an active choice to prevent oneself from unpleasant or harmful information. This has been extensively shown in the context of health information, where many people with life-threatening illnesses prefer to avoid information about their health

condition (e.g., Baker, 1998; Mills & Davidson, 2002; Wong et al., 2000). Put more generally, a major reason for avoiding information is that people cannot oversee the consequences the knowledge would have (e.g., Mischel, 2014). It has been noted that the information avoided can be either undesirable or desirable (Foust & Taber, 2023). A classic example of undesirable information is the revelation that one has a high risk of contracting a particular disease. An example of desirable information is the ending of a television series, where the information itself is desired but not at the particular point in time.

In summary, the concept of information avoidance focuses on a person being aware that there is (or might be) some information that one prefers not to know. Therefore, information avoidance is strategic, whereas information anxiety is a negative feeling. Information regret, in contrast, deals with information that one either did not want to receive but received anyway, or information that one wanted to receive but later regretted knowing.

Deliberate ignorance

This section is about people *deciding to ignore information*, mainly because they consider it negative. Deliberate ignorance is a choice people make not to be confronted with information they know exists. The concept is closely related to information avoidance. However, a person avoiding information may not even be aware of or presume there is information on the matter at hand. In contrast, deliberate ignorance refers to often concrete information, such as the results from a medical test a person took but chooses to ignore the results of, and thereby avoids learning regrettable information (Sharot & Sunstein, 2019). Deliberate ignorance is based on at least the assumption that a piece of information one does not want to learn about exists. In contrast, information avoidance is not necessarily an active decision to avoid a piece of information. Deliberate ignorance is, among other things, an 'emotion-regulation and regret-avoiding device' (Hertwig & Engel, 2016). When one does not ignore potentially harmful information soon enough, the problem is that once acquired, the information cannot be forgotten.

In summary, information regret could 'destroy' deliberate ignorance when people receive information they intended to ignore without asking for it. On the other hand, when they actively search for that information, they give up their deliberate ignorance, even if only in a moment of weakness, and may regret their decision after receiving it.

Information denial

Information denial is about people *actively denying* known information, that is, information they have already received. Information denial is also related to the fact that it is not actively possible to forget information once it has been received. Denial is a coping strategy used to deal with information one cannot accept, and it can therefore serve to avoid information regret.

Keeping secrets

This section examines people *actively hiding information* from others, indicating that information avoidance can be socially collaborative (Brashers et al., 2004). It may be that people do not pass on information because it might upset the person who would receive it (see Ruthven, 2022). Information relevant to a person can be known to others but not to the person themselves (cf. the concept of the 'Johari Window', see Ford (2015, p. 38)). People keeping a secret from the 'target person' act as gatekeepers of that information. Keeping a secret is hard (for the 'owner' of the information). A person may disclose information because they can no longer bear the pressure of keeping it. However, the act of keeping secrets focuses on the sender's perspective, not on the recipient's. Nonetheless, a person who receives the information may feel information regret about having received it.

Summary of related concepts

In summary, the review of related concepts reveals that the research field is predominantly interested in problems with information *before* people seek or receive it, focusing on individuals

who do *not* seek information due to their anxiety about the outcome of that seeking. A notable exception is research on information overload, where seeking took place, but the amount of information found or available is too large to cope with. However, in the case of information overload, people are often overwhelmed by the sheer *volume* of information, rather than by the information they actually absorb. Information regret, situated after information seeking or some other form of information exposure has occurred, recognizes the fact that a recipient has already received the information and regards it as negatively impacting them. Therefore, information regret is a unique concept that broadens the perspective of information behaviour research.

How do people receive information that they later potentially regret having received?

People may receive information that they will later potentially regret having received in multiple ways. In fact, this type of information can be acquired in all ways described as the 'information acquisition space' by Erdelez & Makri (2020): 1. Undirected seeking, 2. Directed seeking (search/browse), active monitoring, 3. Passive awareness, 4. Passive monitoring. However, information passed on from person to person (i.e., not mediated through an information system) may also reach a person who is not even passively aware but receives the information from a sender without having the chance to avoid it. In all these cases, people can receive information that they later regret having received. This shows that information regrets can result from any type of information acquisition. However, when we consider that people who regret having received information may later blame someone for disclosing it, active seeking and disclosure by another person seem particularly important. The person with the information regret may either blame themselves or another person for having disclosed the now undesirable information. Because in our case, we need to also include information as something that is passed on directly from one person to another (other people as sources), we leave the focus of information science on recorded or manifested information (Buckland, 1991; Petras, 2023) and also consider volatile spoken communication, more a topic of communication research.

Empirical study

In this section, I report the results of a first exploratory questionnaire-based study on information regrets. It aims to provide an initial insight into people's information regrets, their types, and their severity. Given the convenience sample and other limitations of the approach described below, the data do not allow for any generalisations beyond the sample investigated. Accordingly, the reported incidents should not be mistaken for providing information on how often particular incidents lead to information regret.

Methods

To get a first impression of the phenomenon of information regrets, I designed a questionnaire and collected answers from 141 participants. The aim was to determine in which situations people receive information that they later regret having learned about, whether they regret more current or past incidents, how much they still regret having received that information, and how much they believe the received information has changed their lives.

The questionnaire contained the following 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.*

This question prompts participants to briefly describe a situation in which they received information that they later regretted having obtained. The question is formulated to capture both instances in which the information was actively sought and instances in which people encountered it in other ways.

Q2: *In which year did you receive the information?*

The answer to this question was used to see how much time had passed since the reported incident.

Q3: *How much do you still regret knowing this information today?*

To gauge the severity of the participants' regret for having received the information in question, we asked them to rate their regret on a scale from 1 to 10, with the endpoints labelled as 'I don't regret it anymore' and 'I regret this very much.'

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.*

To determine whether the information regret indicates a life-changing event, I asked participants whether they think their lives would have been different if they had not received that information.

The questionnaire was intentionally kept short. The intention was to collect a sufficiently large number of responses without requiring too much effort from the participants. As this research is exploratory in nature and the questionnaire results are intended only to provide a preliminary understanding of the investigated phenomenon, I decided against using more in-depth methods, such as interviews.

Participants and data collection

Data were collected on January 5, 2024. The questionnaire was administered on Prolific, a platform that facilitates the easy recruitment of participants through panels. I collected responses from 142 participants, 50% of whom were male and 50% female. I restricted the sample to participants from the UK and the US, who were required to be native English speakers. I did not aim for a representative sample, as this research is exploratory. However, I aimed for a balanced gender distribution. Prolific allows only for a binary gender distinction, so, for lack of better options, we stuck with that. Only individuals who had experienced information regret were invited to participate in the survey. Because of the convenience sample, the data do not allow for statements about the frequency of information regrets (and this was not the intention of this study, anyway).

Results

Topics and situations

The topics of information people regret having received cover a broad spectrum. Recurring themes in the data are finding out about someone cheating, financial problems, crimes, and health conditions. Apart from the person themselves, people affected are often close friends, relatives, co-workers, or romantic partners.

The incidents reported range from the trivial to the severe. For instance, respondent 72 reports that, '*It may seem trivial, but I bought a TV on black friday in 2022, then saw that it had gotten even cheaper in the weeks afterwards*'. In contrast, the data reveal many high-impact incidents. The following examples from the data illustrate this:

> *I was looking for a new contact at a client that I have worked with for many years. The person I was speaking to previously had always replied almost instantly. But then started to ignore calls and all other correspondence. I couldn't get any concrete information from their office and it turns out that they had been fired for a crime that really changed my opinion of them.* (Respondent 25)
>
> *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)

Regarding the people involved with the information found, many respondents report regretting having encountered information on close friends or relatives:

> *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. It provoked me to search for more evidence of infidelity towards my mother and found a fair bit; I didn't keep any of it and have no physical proof now, as such, I really regret ever learning about it.* (Respondent 30)

Information seeking and information encountering

Information regret can be triggered by active information seeking or by – often accidental – information encountering. In the latter case, the person encountering the information is unaware that this information or information related to a topic in their life (e.g., adultery) exists.

Some people search for information out of curiosity and later regret having done so. These instances can be divided into two categories: cases where a person searches for information in publicly available sources (most notably, search engines and social media), and cases where the information is private (for instance, in a file on a personal computer or pictures on a smartphone). In the latter case, the person searching for the information is usually aware that they are doing something they should not:

> *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)

Additionally, in some instances, people searched for something but found something else, which they later regretted having learned. Some respondents also reported encountering information they were not actively seeking:

> *I was working as a personal assistant at the time and I had access to my bosses emails. I accidentally clicked into an email when looking for something and read about a member of staff in our department being made redundant at the end of the week.* (Respondent 120)

This suggests that people can find themselves in an unpleasant situation where they regret having received information without actively participating in disclosing it.

Sources

The information that people later regret having received can come from a variety of sources. The most notable distinction is between information received through electronic sources (e.g., search engines, social media, websites), information obtained from other people, and information found or encountered in the physical world (e.g., by looking into someone else's drawer). Some examples of the sources where respondents got the information in question from are other people directly offering the information, overhearing a conversation, actively searching on the Internet, seeing information on social media, reading another person's diary, an accidental meeting, watching someone without them knowing, and searching the physical space for something but then finding something else.

Time and impact

Most incidents the respondents reported occurred within the last couple of years. However, some incidents happened many years ago, dating back to the 1960s. As expected, there were incidents that did not leave a lasting impact and are no longer much regretted. For instance, respondent 16 reported,

> *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. I don't think I'd regret any other kind of information, as long as it's truthful.* (Respondent 16)

and stated that they did not much regret knowing this information now (rated lowest on the scale from 1 to 10). Further, they said that knowing this information did not have any severe consequences: '*my enjoyment of certain things would have been stronger. but other than that there's been no particular effect*'.

However, the data also reveals incidents where people's information regret is (still) very high. One example of an incident still rated 10 on the scale is respondent 83's story of how they discovered a family secret, '*Discovering a family secret. I accidently discovered a piece of information about a close member of my family. It concerned my sister-in-law*'. Asked about how their life would have been different without knowing this information, they wrote, '*It changed my relationship with her and forced me to keep a secret from my brother. I am not sure that this was the best thing to do*'. The consequences of having received information can be severe, e.g., someone cut off communication with a friend after learning that a piece of gossip they received through social media was true (Respondent 6).

There is no statistical correlation between the amount of time that has passed since the information was learned and the severity of the information regret. The data shows all combinations of time passed and severity: some cases have been rated high, while others have been rated low, regardless of the time that has passed. In some cases, people still regret heavily (10 out of 10) even when the reported incident seems minor, such as having heard about a surprise birthday party beforehand (Respondent 39). Here, the person affected said that the information changed their life '*not at all*'.

Information regret model

From theoretical considerations outlined above and the questionnaire answers, I derived a model describing how information regrets can result from either active information seeking or information encountering, considering that having received information can be regretted immediately or after some time has passed. The model is depicted in Fig. 1, the details are described in the following paragraphs.

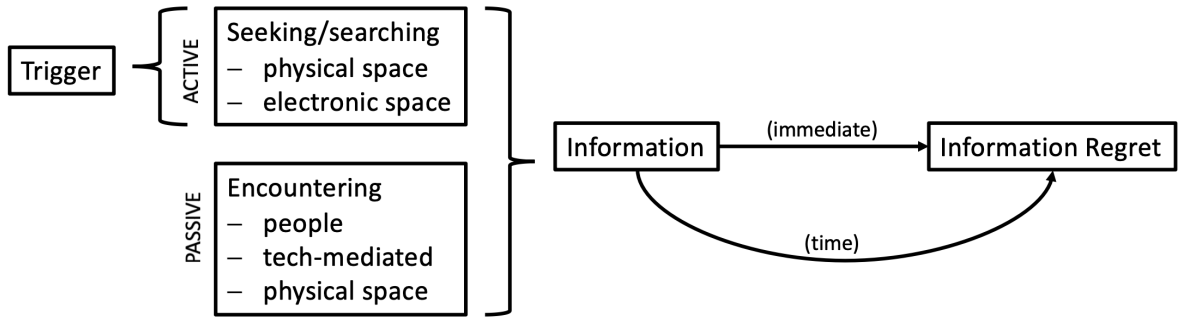

Fig. 1: Information regret model.

Triggers

Firstly, there can be a trigger (or 'activating mechanism' in Wilson and Walsh's (1996) terms) that leads a person to actively search for information. Examples of triggers include reading about a person or event or experiencing a health symptom.

Active information seeking

A trigger can lead to active information seeking, whether in physical or electronic spaces. Examples of searching physical spaces include searching through drawers in a person's study (Respondent 30) or reading a person's diary (Respondent 22). The most common form of searching the electronic space mentioned is unsurprisingly looking up something on Google, but also active search on social media.

Information encountering

In many cases, people stumble upon information they later regret having received through information encountering, without a trigger. They receive information either directly from people or through technology. In the former case, other people sometimes reveal information to a person, and sometimes a person overhears a conversation where the information was not intended for them. For information transmitted through electronic media, participants most commonly mentioned seeing information on social media, but also encountered it by chance when using someone else's device. For instance, Respondent 108 mentioned that they saw an incoming text message while repairing someone else's mobile phone.

Immediate vs later information regret

Sometimes, people immediately regret having seen a piece of information. For instance, one participant said they '*googled a medical issue that my friend told me about and due to the pictures and the description of it immediately regretted looking for it as I'm very squeamish*!' (Respondent 4). In other cases, information regret only comes after some time has passed.

Discussion and conclusion

From the questionnaire answers, we see that there are various situations in which people receive information they later regret having received. Information that later results in an information regret can come from many sources, including people, the internet, social media, physical documents such as diaries, or messages on mobile phones. Information relevant to information regrets can be related to work or private life. At work, information may concern colleagues or the person receiving the information themselves; in private life, the information often concerns the receiver's partner, friends, or family members. Topics vary widely, ranging from a person cheating on their partner to finding out that a co-worker had committed a crime. In some instances, people still regret having received a piece of information even after many years have passed since they first learned of it. This highlights the profound impact a piece of information can have on people's lives, demonstrating that it can be lifechanging.

In the empirical data, we found both desirable and undesirable information, which confirms Sweeny et al.'s (2010) findings: the information can be either undesirable (e.g., information that one is at high risk of a serious disease) or desirable (e.g., the ending of a sports game one has not yet watched). The data revealed that people sometimes not only regret having obtained some information but also having searched for it in the first place. These cases are not considered in the information regret model, and this type of regret is an interesting phenomenon in its own right. Information regret may stem from knowledge that others have already possessed about a person, possibly for a very long time. Future research, categorising information regret incidents into the Johari Window (Luft & Ingham, 1955, cited in Ford, 2015, p. 38), could further explore and differentiate information regret incidents.

It should be noted that information regret can be closely related to information anxiety. Sometimes, people overcome their information anxiety to explore something unpleasant (like in the Stasi case mentioned in the introduction), finding harmful information and later regretting it. Information regret is also related to the concept of serendipity (Edward Foster & Ellis, 2014; Erdelez & Makri, 2020). However, while serendipity is by definition a lucky surprise, encountering information one later regrets to have learned often can be seen as 'negative serendipity': a person is looking for something, but then finds something else, which is, in the case of information regret, something unpleasant.

In terms of the impact of information regret incidents, the survey data clearly indicates that this impact is highly personal. The results indicate that personal relevance plays a significant role in determining how much people regret having received a piece of information. This aligns with psychological research on the impact of a topic or issue on an individual (Foust & Taber, 2023). Further research on information regret can also benefit from psychological research on actively forgetting unwanted memories (Costanzi et al., 2021).

As this is a first exploratory study of information regret, it can only provide a preliminary glimpse into the phenomenon. The sample is not representative of any population and, therefore, the data obtained can only serve as illustrations of information regret incidents. Furthermore, we only asked a limited number of questions. The results may be seen as superficial compared to in-depth interviews, which would be a logical next step in researching information regret.

Acknowledgements and data availability

Research data is available at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/627WK.

About the author

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