

Many people feel overwhelmed by a flood of information. They choose to ignore certain information. Research shows that such deliberate ignoring can be advantageous and even protect one's well-being.



# IGNORANCE CREATES CLARITY

*TEXT: TILL HEIN*

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Cognitive scientist Ralph Hertwig and his team at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin are investigating why people consciously choose not to take note of certain information – and why this can sometimes be advantageous for orientation in our complex world.

What would humans be without curiosity? This drive has allowed us to develop medicines and send people into space. Without curiosity, there would be no philosophy, quantum physics, or the Internet. Thanks to global data sharing, far more people have access to far more information than at any other time in history. We might like to think that the knowledge available to us is absolutely necessary to meet the complex challenges of the modern world. How can it be, then, that people deliberately choose to ignore certain information? One of the few philosophers who could appreciate such ignorance was Friedrich Nietzsche. In the 19th century, he provocatively asked whether ignorance might be more helpful than knowledge in leading a happy life.

## Deliberate ignorance

As strange as the subject sounds, it has been studied empirically for several years. One of the pioneers in this field is cognitive scientist Ralph Hertwig, who heads the Center for Adaptive Rationality at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. He and his colleagues are studying a phenomenon they call *deliberate ignorance*. Where does it occur in everyday life? What are the motives behind it? And can knowledge actually be harmful to our personal well-being, how we orient ourselves in complex environments, and a thriving and fair society?

As studies by Hertwig and his team show, people ignore information surprisingly often. “The reasons are sometimes hard to understand,” he says. In many cases, however, people have perfectly rational reasons for not wanting to know certain things. “For example, would you want to know which of your colleagues received the highest bonus at the end of the year?” the researcher asks. “Or whether you have an increased risk of Alzheimer’s disease?” Many people answer “no” to such questions. Clearly, there are motives more powerful than human curiosity. In an ongoing study, researchers have even found evidence of this phenomenon among children, who are generally considered to be especially curious. For example, they asked children between the ages of eight and fourteen to imagine the following situation: “You are playing with other children. After a while, you leave the room – and when you come back, your favorite toy is broken. Would you like to know who broke the toy?” For 87 percent of the children, the answer was yes. But only 73 percent said they would investigate further if their playmates refused to say who did it. “When the playmates were close friends, even fewer children wanted to find out who was to blame than, say, with new classmates,” says Azzurra Ruggeri, Professor of Cognitive and Developmental Psychology and one of the study’s leaders. “Our results thus far clearly show that children are not uncondition-

ally curious,” the researcher says. “They consciously prefer to leave some things unknown.”

And adults? The files kept by the Stasi, the former East German secret police, were opened more than 30 years ago. Since then, more than two million citizens have exercised their right to view them. Estimating that more than five million former East German citizens believe that a Stasi file had been opened on them, Ralph Hertwig and Dagmar Ellerbrock, Professor of Modern and Contemporary History at the Technical University of Dresden, jointly conducted a study of people who have chosen not to view their file.

Hertwig and Ellerbrock asked 161 men and women about the reasons behind their decision. Some cited political motives. For example, they criticized the fact that people’s perceptions of East Germany were often reduced to the Stasi and its methods, especially by West Germans, and they did not want to contribute to this simplification. However, more than half of the interviewees said the reason they did not want to know is that they were afraid they might have been spied on by people close to them. They feared that their file would reveal things that would make them very sad, deeply disappointed, or angry.

“We distinguish at least six classes of deliberate ignorance,” says Ralph Hertwig. “Often it is a matter of regulating emotions, especially avoiding potential negative feelings.” So, is it a question of cowardice? Hertwig smiles. He refrains from making such judgments. “People who don’t want to know certain things are often accused of being immature, ethically questionable, or unwise,” he says. But such generalizations fall short. In many areas of life, deliberate ignorance presents not only risks, but also opportunities: in health care, for example. Many people do not get preventive screenings, even when they are covered by health insurance – often out of fear of a negative diagnosis. In the case of glaucoma, for example, this can be a mistake: If this disease of the optic nerve is detected in its early stages, its progression can often be stopped or at least slowed down with special eye drops.

“However, one should carefully consider the value of other preventive examinations,” says Ralph Hertwig: Ultra-

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### SUMMARY

Not wanting to know certain facts – such as an early diagnosis of a terminal illness – helps regulate negative emotions.

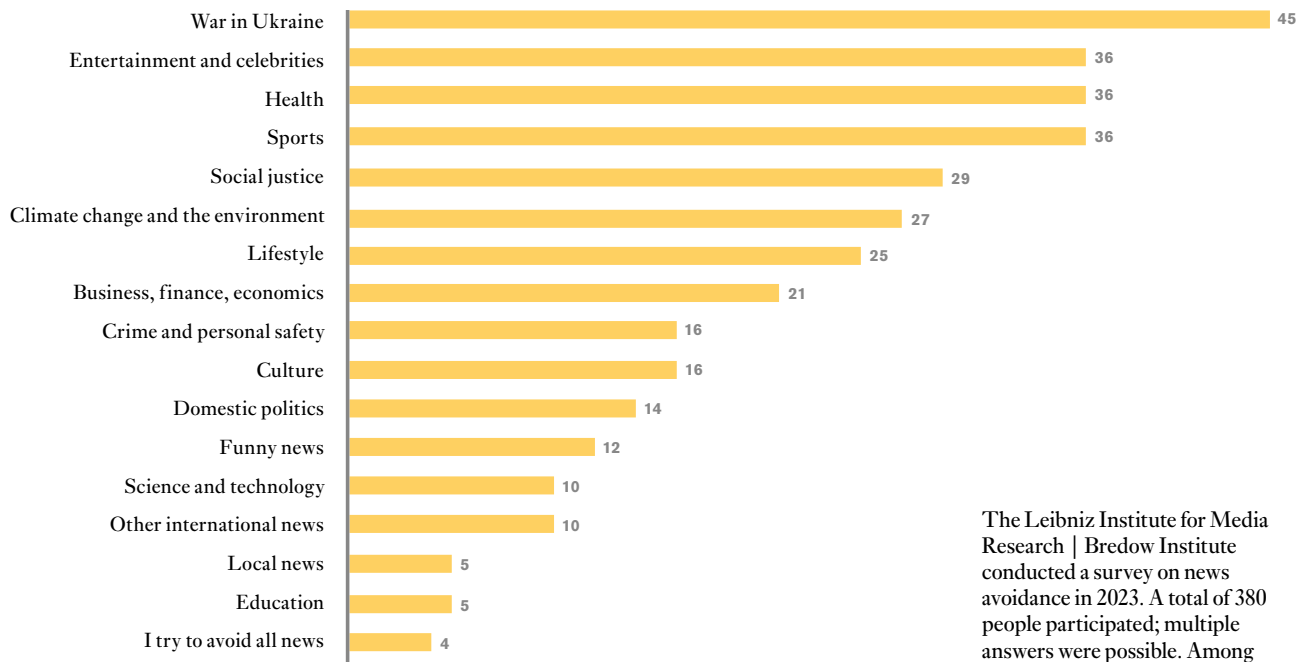
A rule of thumb is often better for making decisions than gathering all the available facts. In selection processes, ignoring information can prevent discrimination.

With the flood of misinformation on the Internet, it is more important to first check who is providing the information than to read, watch, or listen to the – often fabricated – content.

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“WHAT NEWS STORIES DO YOU TRY TO AVOID?” (ANSWERS AS A PERCENTAGE)



The Leibniz Institute for Media Research | Bredow Institute conducted a survey on news avoidance in 2023. A total of 380 people participated; multiple answers were possible. Among the respondents, 45 percent deliberately ignored the war in Ukraine. But other important issues such as health, social justice, climate change, and the environment are also no longer on the radar for many.

sound diagnostics for the early detection of ovarian cancer, for example, do not lead to fewer women dying of such tumors, as a study from the United States shows. And the six correct diagnoses out of 1,000 participants were more than offset by 32 incorrect ones, leading to unnecessary surgery that removed healthy ovaries. In addition, medical screenings often uncover things by chance that might never have been noticed otherwise, such as harmless, benign tumors. This can lead to psychological stress and unnecessary procedures. “Overdiagnosis and overtreatment are widespread in modern medicine. Deliberate ignorance can sometimes be a good strategy,” says Hertwig.

A recent example: in the June 2023 issue of the *American Journal of Human Genetics*, US pediatricians advocated the routine sequencing of the entire genome of newborns in order to inform parents about genetic diseases that could develop in their children’s lives with varying degrees of probability. This recommendation is also being seriously discussed here in Germany. “But – and this is a question that parents are likely to ask themselves – will it help to know which genetic disease my child is more or less likely to develop at some point in their lifetime?” Hertwig asks. Many of the diseases

identified in such screenings, he continues, cannot be treated or prevented. In those cases, the only option is to wait anxiously to see whether the disease actually manifests.

Even those who want to learn something new can benefit from deliberate ignorance, because sometimes too much knowledge can be demotivating: “If you’re a beginner at tennis or learning a language, constantly comparing yourself to advanced players or speakers who are much better at everything can easily lead to frustration.” It is often better to ignore the achievements of experienced individuals and instead be happy about your own more modest progress, which keeps you motivated. Ralph Hertwig is also quick to point out that deliberate ignorance is not always about self-interest. In job applications, for example, omitting certain information can lead to more equal opportunities for women or people from minority groups. An important reason why classical orchestras employ significantly more women than in previous decades is the introduction of “blind auditions,” in which applicants play behind a curtain so that the jury can evaluate only the quality of the musical performance, and other characteristics – such as gender – do not come into play.



## Making the application process fairer

Such approaches are leading to improvements in other sectors as well: studies show that last name, age, and gender strongly influence who is invited to interview for a job. Once this hurdle has been overcome, bias can often be eliminated in face-to-face interactions, and equal opportunity increases. In the US, the UK, and Canada, anonymized applications that do not include a photo or the applicant's age or gender have been the norm for decades. Pilot projects have also been launched in Germany: North Rhine-Westphalia tested the process in the public sector in 2011, and Baden-Württemberg did so for small and medium-sized companies in 2013. The impact: more older people, women, and people with a migration background are given the opportunity to present themselves in job interviews. Institutional deliberate ignorance thus leads to greater fairness.

In other areas, however, the strategy of seeking better results through less knowledge seems to have its limits. In his latest book, *The Dark Side of the Brain* (Die dunkle Seite des Gehirns), the bestselling author and psychology professor Stefan Kölsch recommends listing all relevant factors and weighing them carefully against each other before making important decisions such as career choices. According to him, this is the best way to judge which choice is the wisest. But Ralph Hertwig shakes his head. "Studies show that this ideal of complete and careful deliberation does not always lead to better decisions, not least because many factors are associated with uncertainty. Simple rules of thumb are often more helpful, especially when it comes to difficult decisions," says the cognitive scientist. Take the stock market, for example: American economist Harry Markowitz won the 1990 Nobel Prize in economics for developing a mathematically sophisticated portfolio theory that calculates an optimal combination of available investment opportunities based on expected returns and risks. "Personally,

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A strong team: Anastasia Kozyreva and Ralph Hertwig discuss their research results.



PHOTO: NICO WÖHRLE

however, he did not always apply this model,” says Hertwig. As Markowitz recounted in an interview, he sometimes ignored all the detailed information and simply invested equally in bonds and stocks. “Such a radical strategy of deliberate ignorance is often quite successful in the stock market,” says Hertwig. Studies show that it tends to produce good returns, sometimes even better than sophisticated formulas like Markowitz’s.

For the researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, deliberate ignorance seems particularly compelling when it comes to the Internet. “In the digital world, information is constantly available in abundance,” says philosopher Anastasia Kozyreva. But human attention is limited. “Digital networks inundate us with messages, exploiting the processing strategies of our brains that have developed during human evolution. We have not had time to adapt to the digital environment,” says Anastasia Kozyreva. Negative or highly emotional news has always attracted our attention because it warns us of potential dangers or indicates that others in our group need help. Since the invention of the Internet, this tendency has often had negative consequences. “Social media captures our attention by arousing curiosity, outrage, or anger. The longer our eyes stay glued to screens, the more opportunities companies have to show us advertisements and increase their profits,” says the researcher. “We urgently need strategies to regain at least some control.”

## “Social media captures attention.”

ANASTASIA KOZYREVA

Together with researchers from the US and the UK, Anastasia Kozyreva and Ralph Hertwig have summarized such methods within the concept of critical ignoring. Among other things, they suggest muting apps and configuring the home screen of one’s smartphone to display only a few desired applications. Anything too distracting – especially social media and games – should be removed from the phone and, if necessary, accessed only through a browser. They also recommend clear screen time limits, not only for children and teenagers.

Another problem is that much of the information on the Internet comes from questionable sources. Experiments have shown that not only professors, but also much younger students have difficulty identifying dubious websites as such. To make it easier to spot disinformation, the researchers recommend a method called “lateral reading.” Instead of reading line by line and critically examining each statement, as students are taught to do in school, “you should approach it like professional fact checkers: open another tab in your browser at an early stage in the research process and google who is behind the information in question,” says Kozyreva. This quickly tells you whether you’re dealing with lobbyists or even extremists, and whether it might be better to ignore those sites and content in the future.

One more point is important to the researcher: “You should never respond to racist or sexist comments and insults on the Internet.” Those who spread such content want to provoke, and any reaction makes them feel validated. “Don’t feed the trolls!” Kozyreva warns. Instead, ignore the content, block it if possible, and report it to the platform operators. Anastasia Kozyreva and her colleagues argue that “Internet literacy” should be included in middle and high school curricula and that young people should be taught not only critical thinking, but also critical ignoring. “Without the ability to consciously decide what to ignore on the Internet and where to focus our attention, we allow others to take control of our eyes and minds,” she says.

The researchers are aware of the risk that people may rely even more on their biases when ignoring information, rejecting news wholesale and filtering out anything that does not align with their political views. In this regard, the results of a study conducted by the Leibniz Institute for Media Research | Hans Bredow Institute in June 2023 are worrying: only 52 percent of adult Internet users have a strong interest in information about current political events. That is 10 percent less than last year. Interest is lowest among 18–24-year-olds, of whom only 28 percent are very interested in news.

“From my point of view, this is also a problematic development,” says Ralph Hertwig. That is why he does not recommend critical ignoring as a one-size-fits-all solution. “Rather, it is a strategy that can and probably must be used selectively to protect ourselves from manipulative influence on our attention and opinions in the digital world.” The goal is not to avoid news altogether, but to systematically select high-quality news.

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