Virtual Hoarding

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INTRODUCTION

This article outlines hoarding issues involving virtual goods (including databases, videos, images, and digital documents) in workplace, household, and personal contexts. It covers security issues, intellectual property concerns, and matters related to information flow in organizational settings. The article also includes reflections about the moral and personal dimensions of virtual hoarding, with an emphasis on information ethics and the opportunistic appropriation of organizational data (and in some cases, knowledge) for individual gain. Organizations as well as individuals could face substantial losses through the compulsion to "save" virtual goods without developing and carrying out appropriate strategies for managing them.

Virtual hoarding issues may not seem to be critical given the decreased costs of on-site and backup storage as well as relatively-inexpensive storage facilities in the "cloud." However, data that are not managed in terms of their formats and their storage substrata could certainly present issues for organizations; also, data that are inappropriately removed from the flow of information in organizations may put vital processes at risk. On the level of the individual, personal and professional issues involving the storage of hundreds of thousands of images, videos, and documents with little context or metadata could present comparable problems, albeit on a more contained scale. According to researchers, the reasons that individuals become hoarders range from uncertainty avoidance and OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) to opportunistic motives for personal acquisition and perhaps subsequent advancement (Bratiotis, Schmalisch, & Steketee, 2011; Grant, 2014; Oravec, 2015). At the organizational level, the system-level aspects that lead individuals in particular contexts to hoard data may have close parallels to these individual-level phenomena.

BACKGROUND

The study of virtual or digital hoarding is just emerging, and new case studies, survey results, and other forms of research are being undertaken and disseminated (Oravec, 2015; van Bennekom, Blom, Vulink, & Denys, 2015). Although this article focuses on the hoarding of virtual goods, some discussion of the hoarding of physical objects may provide background and insights. In a variety of social settings, hoarding behavior involving physical items is expanding in its impact; hoarding has been construed as a mental health issue in some organizations (Bratiotis, Schmalisch, & Steketee, 2011) and has been labeled as a disorder in the DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Capacities for managing the locations of and access to physical as well as virtual entities are often considered central to competent societal functioning. Lepselter (2011) relates dozens of negative characterizations of hoarding in newspapers, television, and social media. The hoarding of "virtual goods" is also generating concern and has the potential to be even more costly for organizations than its physical correlate. Files that are not properly identified and stored might be seen as appropriately "saved" if placed in the "cloud." However, if metadata about the files are not available, the files may be essentially worthless, wasting precious organizational resources. Gormley and Gormley (2012) describe the condition of "information clutter" as running

parallel with hoarding behavior, a situation that is generally not conducive to conducting efficient workplace operations.

Certain kinds of organizations and professions may be more prone to virtual hoarding issues than others. Peyton (2015) describes the problems some law firms have with digital data management and relates that "Many firms are notorious data hoarders and seem to hold old records without any legitimate justification" (p. 18). Knowledge hoarding has been shown to become a concern in workplace contexts in which uncertainty and loss of trust are issues (Holten, Hancock, Persson, Hansen, & Hogh, 2016; Oravec, 2017). For many professionals, the transition is often difficult from an era in which information was relatively scarce (just a few decades ago) to one in which information resources are overwhelming in size, access, and complexity. Peyton relates that "sub-standard information governance and recordkeeping model" are often found in professional settings, and declares that "Legitimate business justifications for retaining electronic information do not include 'I may need that information someday—you never know'" (p. 19). "Big data" analytic capabilities may compensate for some non-optimal organizational storage and retrieval practices, but may not provide an adequate overall solution for archival problems (Datskovsky, 2013).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE

Issues, Controversies, Problems

The varieties of virtual goods accumulated by individuals have evolved from simple e-mail address rosters to complex fantasy sports strategies and extraordinarily detailed avatars (Ng and Höpfl, 2011; Oravec, 2015). Good (2013) categorizes an assortment of the "personal media archives" that are often collected and maintained by households, assemblages that include digital images associated with vacations and other family events. Some social media platforms have served to support hoard-

ing behavior in archival activities: for example, Schiele and Hughes (2013) describe hoarding behavior linked with the Pinterest platform, relating how the accumulation of thousands of images becomes part of everyday life in many households. They assert that "consumers lead second lives online claiming ownership to virtual goods and images, using social media to create, control and consume content "(p. 47). In the 1990s, the emergence of the music sharing program Napster brought considerable attention to the hoarding of digital entities, with an emphasis on intellectual property concerns (Newman, 2013). BitTorrent and other kinds of peer-to-peer networks helped to create a "sharing culture" in which hoarding of virtual goods without subsequently allowing others to download them was often portrayed as inappropriate and even "selfish" behavior. The "hoarding ratios" were high for those who accumulated digital materials from the network without making them subsequently available to others (Rando, 2014).

The hoarding of virtual items has not yet been shown to be a direct substitute in psychological terms for the hoarding of physical items. Researchers have provided few clues as to whether the individuals who collect massive quantities of physical goods will have tendencies to collect large amounts of virtual goods as well. So far, little research has been done linking the two and asking whether hoarders in physical realms have tendencies to hoard in virtual platforms as well (Oravec, 2015). Hogan (2015) describes a perspective that may shed light on virtual hoarding phenomena: "the more we encourage the mass hoarding of digital media based on this dumpster model, the more we reinforce the logic of the always-on, always-ready archive" (p. 20). The casualness with which large data repositories can be stored without strategic consideration of how or whether they will be accessed in the future can make individuals feel temporary security; after all, they did not delete the files so they supposedly will be able to access them at a later point, even if the forensics involved (or the excavation, in terms of massive

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