

Chapter 48

Virtual Hoarding

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines hoarding issues involving virtual or digital goods (including video and image files, digital documents, etc.) in the context of workplace and household settings. It covers “dark data” security issues and intellectual property concerns as well as matters related to information flow. It discusses research about why and how individuals hoard both physical and virtual entities, outlining how this hoarding can negatively impact particular systems. The chapter also includes reflections about the moral and personal dimensions of virtual hoarding, with an emphasis on information ethics and concerns about strategic and opportunistic hoarding. 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, metadata, and substrata could certainly present issues for organizations; data that are inappropriately removed from the standard flow of information within organizations also present potential losses.

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

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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, & Høgh, 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).

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