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Infophobia – Identification of the Concept and Characteristics of the Phenomenon

ABSTRACT: The author of the article presents the concept of infophobia and brings the characteristics of this phenomenon. There are shown the basis of the phobia of information in the form of technophobia and information anxiety and the infophobia is portrayed as an information disease. There are indicated the factors that cause the infophobia such as information deficit and information overload, sources of information, carries of information, information channels and information processes. Finally there are presented the consequences of this phenomenon namely digital exclusion (e-exclusion), informational exclusion and information illiteracy.

KEYWORDS: infophobia, technophobia, information anxiety, the information society, an information disease

Introduction

It is difficult to determine what the infophobia is because this term does not appear in normative publications and moreover there are no empirical researches in this area so far. However, the very phenomenon is widely recognized in both individual and social aspect. Therefore, there is

important to define its semantic range and the nature in order to describe its specificity and present its characteristic features.

Technophobia and Information Anxiety

The concept of infophobia is directly related to the phenomenon of technophobia and information anxiety and they substantially constitute its source. A phobia is a neurotic disease manifested in the constant fear due to an object or a situation which in fact are not a real threat at all. But, as a consequence a person suffering from this type of disorder avoids factors that cause this fear which in turn contributes to difficulties in the normal functioning among people. Moreover, individuals struggling with different types of phobias are fully aware of the groundlessness of their fear but despite of this fact they are not able to control their irrational anxiety reactions.

Technophobia is a typical kind of phobia, in short it is the deepseated and groundless fear of technology. This term is well established in everyday language as well as in the professional literature[1]. It defines the ailment manifested by a morbid fear of technical achievements of civilization especially of electronics. The symptoms of technophobia are exactly the same as in the case other phobias and they are expressed in an accelerated heart rate, dizziness, excessive sweating, dry mouth, dyspnoea, lockjaw and other psychosomatic manifestations. Technophobia in a broader sense refers not only to the very technology but to development and progress in general that is any kind of modernity associated with the technical achievements. Particularly troublesome is the existence of a technophobe in information societies in which technology is the basis of living and functioning.

With regard to information anxiety it is the phenomenon of the emotional state of mind in which a person feels uncomfortable because of the anxiety factor which is broadly understood information. In other

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[1] See e.g. M. J. Brosnan, *Technophobia. The Psychological Impact of Information Technology*, London 1998; M. Szpunar, *Technofobia versus Technofilia – Technologia i jej Miejsce we Współczesnym Świecie*, in: *Problemy Społeczne w Grze Politycznej. Współczesne Zagrożenia Społeczne – Diagnoza i Przeciwdziałanie*, ed. J. Królikowska, Warszawa 2006, pp. 370–384.

words, the element of reality which is information causes a troublesome condition in which an individual experiences a mood of eager and strong anxiety induced exactly by information.

Information anxiety is described by Richard Saul Wurman as „the ever-widening gap between what we understand and what we think we should understand"[2]. So, Wurman uses this term in order to indicate the attitude of an individual towards the amount of information and the restrictions on the possibility of processing it. This is the reason for the formation of the mentioned by the author gap. As Wurman further characterizes this phenomenon, information anxiety „is the black hole between data and knowledge, and it happens when information doesn't tell us what we want or need to know"[3].

In this way, technophobia and information anxiety are the underlying basis of infophobia. The term infophobia appeared for instance in the title of the book by the American author Matthew Lesko „Info-Fobia. How to Survive in an Information Society" published in Kesington in 1996. The author's intention has been to help the readers in coping with information overload and to indicate how to face the reality of the information society which may cause the mentioned in the title infophobia. The use of this term in the title of this publication suggests that the phenomenon of infophobia and its significance was noticed already at the end of the twentieth century.

In spite of this fact, this term is not present, until now, in any dictionary or encyclopaedia. On the other hand, this state of affairs can result from certain problems with the formation of an adequate definition of this term due to its difficult to grasp semantic layer but on the other hand it may be a sign of the constant discrediting of the significance of this phenomenon and unnoticing its importance.

Infofobia as an Information Disease

As it has been mentioned above the sources of the infophobia are technophobia especially its type characterized by the fear of information

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[2]   R. S. Wurman, *Information Anxiety*, 2nd ed., New York 1989, p. 34.
[3]   Ibid.

communication technology (ICT) and information anxiety because when it greatly grows can transform into the phobia of information that is the infophobia. The infophobia belongs to a wide range of information diseases. These diseases are distinguished by their cause which is just information[4]. The infophobia is a peculiar kind of an information disease characterized by its intensity and by the fact that it is based on the actual, groundless and irrational fear of information. Symptoms of the infophobia are similar as in the case of other phobias although the lack of research in this area still does not allow to determine whether there are specific distinguishing symptoms of this sort of obsession. Additionally, there are also no studies which would verify what in fact the manifestations of the infophobia are and what its characteristic features and concrete reasons are.

Factors that cause the Infophobia

The phenomenon of infophobia is difficult to define because it refers to information which is an extremely elusive element of reality. According to Józef Thierry information can be understood as „any message regardless of its content, importance, form"[5]. Consequently, it is a factor that decreases someone's ignorance because it delivers something new, unfamiliar or discovering. However, the phobia of information refers not only in the strict sense to the very information but also to everything that directly pertains to it namely sources of information, carriers of information, information channels and information processes. Thus, each of these elements and not just „any" information can become the cause of the infophobia.

   The cause of the infophobia can be information overload as well as information deficit. Both cases can lead to the situation in which a user of information will not achieve an intended goal which will become the direct cause of the deep anxiety which eventually may transform into

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   [4] See e.g. W. Babik, *O Niektórych Chorobach Powodowanych przez Informacje*, in: *Komputer w Edukacji. 16 Ogólnopolskie Sympozjum Naukowe, Kraków 29–30 września 2006*, ed. J. Morbitzer, Kraków 2006, pp. 15–20; E. Głowacka, *Ekologia Informacji – Sposób na Choroby Informacyjne?*, „Forum Bibliotek Medycznych", Vol. 2, No. 2 (4), 2009, pp. 151–164.
   [5] J. Thierry, *Technologia i Organizacja Informacji Naukowej*, Warszawa 1980, p. 9.

the phobia of information. Additionally, factors that contribute to the occurrence of the infophobia are also misunderstanding of information, the unawareness of the existence of specific information and the incompetence in getting specified information.

With regard to sources of information that is objects which directly provide information regardless of their type (personal, institutional, documental, systemic) the phobia of information in this case refers to the very fact of being in contact with them regardless of what kind of information they deliver. Therefore, the factor that causes the infophobia is not something that is transmitted but the very source of information for instance its kind, form or pattern.

Regarding carriers of information in this case also not the very information but certain objects which carry information are the cause of the phobia of information. Carriers of information can be defined as „material objects physical features of which allow to store data on or in them"[6] that is "material objects in which information is recorded in the form of surface or spatial changes of properties of an object"[7]. So, they are tools for carrying data designed for storing and utilizing information collected in them, as a consequence they are not sources but transmitters. The collection of carriers of information includes books, tapes, cassettes, discs or magnetic cards. They also may cause the infophobia and because they are a very important part of the information process the phobia triggered by them considerably reduces the possibility of managing information. The fear of electronic carriers of information among some part of society is particularly visible.

Information channels that is „ways which enable the flow of information from the sender to the recipient"[8] can also be the cause of the infophobia. There can be distinguished three main categories of information channels namely auditory (the speech in a given language or just the very sounds), visual textual (print, hypertext) and visual graphical (an image, a table, a graph, a chart, a formula, a symbol). Regardless of the kind on an information channel the phobia associated with it prevents

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[6] H. Batorowska, B. Czubała, *Wybrane Zagadnienia Nauki o Informacji i Technologii Informacyjnej*, Kraków 1996, p. 43.

[7] T. Bilski, *Pamięć. Nośniki i Systemy Przechowywania Danych*, Warszawa 2008, p. 35.

[8] H. Batorowska, B. Czubała, op. cit., p. 38.

in fact any contact with information because only a given information channel provides the appropriate run of the entire information process.

With regard to particular information processes such as searching, compiling, collecting, storing, processing, exchanging, transferring and using information they all can also become the cause of the infophobia. Especially the activities that require from the part of the user of information certain relevant skills, commitment, concentration or a considerable amount of work can primarily be the source of the phobia of information. Among them particularly important are searching, compiling, processing and using information. The infophobia may occur all the more when the level of competence of the user of information is insufficient or when a given action is unsuccessful and does not bring the desired effect. In this case, similarly, the phobia of information does not refer to the very information but to the specific action associated with a given information process.

The Information Society and the Infofobia

As in everyday life, the practice of doing precedes the theory that describes it, similarly in the case of the infophobia, firstly the situation that caused not just the appearance but the disclosure and the increase in public awareness of the significance of the phenomenon of the phobia of information occurred and this situation was the formation of the information society. The information society is the one in which information is not only the essential but first of all the most important element of its structure. Information determines all of the social processes, influences on public development and decides about the overall functioning of the society.

It is difficult to state whether the infophobia existed before the formation of the information society because there is no evidence for that. However, it can be assumed that this phenomenon is as old as the information itself. The only reason why the phobia of information was not noticed and had rather a marginal character is the fact that there were very few sources of information as well as information carriers.

Only the formation of the society based on information has revealed the nature and the scale of the problem of the infophobia. Except the huge increase in the amount of information generated by the massive rise in

the number of sources and carriers of information in their multiple forms and patterns also the great progression of the circulation speed of various information entities has led to the intensification of the negative phenomena associated with this progress such as the phobia of information.

The Effects of the Infophobia

The consequences of the phobia of information may be any kind of restrictions which considerably prevent free and comfortable functioning of an individual in the information society. The drawbacks of such a state of affairs become the cause of various problems such as mental, communicational, social, cultural, economic, technological and even physical. The most serious effects of the infophobia are digital exclusion (e-exclusion), informational exclusion and information illiteracy.

Digital exclusion (e-exclusion) is a very significant consequence of the phobia of information. It occurs when people who cannot overcome lagging behind because of the rapidly developing information society, and especially the great advancement of information technology are considerably or even entirely excluded from the active participation not only in social changes realized mainly by the technological and informational progress but almost from the normal functioning in the information society. As a result, it leads to the stratification of the population in which the division into people participating in the informational transformation of the society and people uninvolved in it is very clear and actual and much more visible and more significant than the differences in other social spheres[9].

Informational exclusion is the upshot of e-exclusion, although it can also refer to people who are not digitally excluded because it relates not only to the total or sufficient lack of mastery of information communication technology (ITC) but to the general inability to manage information in any form. Thus, informational exclusion appears as a peculiar condition characterized by inability, lack of skills or involvement in exploiting the informational potential of the world. As a result, people who are exclude

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[9] See M. Szpunar, op. cit., pp. 377–378; R. Tadeusiewicz, *Społeczność Internetu*, Warszawa 2002, pp. 285–288.

in this way do not satisfy their informational needs. It happens regardless of whether it is due to people's unawareness of the existence of such needs caused by their ignorance of the informational possibilities of the surrounding reality or the lack of willingness or competences to explore myriads of information that reach us from everywhere[10].

The very important effect of the infophobia can be information illiteracy. It involves not only the lack of skills in handling information technology or insufficient mastery of it but it also applies to all sorts of operations on any type of information that is searching, compiling, collecting, storing, processing, exchanging, transferring, and especially using. Marian Kuraś describes information illiteracy as an inability „to use information [and] an archaic way of its creation, processing, presentation, distribution and use"[11]. The lack of appropriate competences in this area places an infophobe in a very difficult situation because no-one is able to avoid a vast amount of information reaching everyman each day, not only through the channel available by means of information communication technology (ITC), but also directly from the surrounding reality. As a consequence, information illiteracy prevents the full participation in the world, just like the traditional illiteracy excludes from participation in culture and significantly reduces functioning in society, especially in communication.

Conclusions

The infophobia can affect anyone regardless of the level of mastery of information communication technology (ITC), although more exposed to it are people who do not have good information competency skills – not only the ability to use electronic equipment but the general ability to process information in any form. Nonetheless, the phobia of information can also refer to individuals who are proficient and efficient in managing information in a situation in which they experience information overload.

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[10] See W. Gogołek, *Technologie Informacyjne Mediów*, 2nd ed. rev., Warszawa 2006, pp. 239–240.

[11] M. Kuraś, *Analfabetyzm Informatyczny, Analfabetyzm Informacyjny*, „Computer World Polska", No. 1/365, 1999, p. 13.

Therefore, only the full awareness of the rules, the relations and the determinants of the information reality and the information society in particular can prevent suffering from the infophobia.

The phobia of information is undoubtedly the extreme, in addition it is difficult to accurately characterize it and what is more, it is a very troublesome ailment in the post-modern reality in which information is the basis for the functioning of absolutely all spheres of life. It is impossible to imagine the functioning of an infophobe in the world in which information is the fundamental and the most important component of it. Fortunately, the infophobia, like any other phobia, is completely curable. It all depends on who it refers to, what are its causes, intensity and duration. The given therapy – its type and length – also depends on the personality of an individual who suffers from this disease and this fact affects the effectiveness of treatment too.

Ending

In spite of the fact that there is a wide range of literature referring to information[12] and information society[13] and concerning or at least signalizing such issues as information overload[14], information anxiety or other negative phenomena related to information, there are no publications that directly pertain to the phobia of information. There are only certain references[15], while in most cases records are usually of popularizing character and are not supported by the scientific apparatus, although they quite often accurately examine this matter and in this way may be

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[12] See e.g. L. Brillouin, *Science and Information Theory*, New York, 1956; *Analiza pojęcia informacji*, ed. J. J. Jadacki, Warszawa 2003.

[13] See e.g. P. Drucker, *The Age of Discontinuity*, London 1969; D. Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society. A Venture of Social Forecasting*, New York 1976; M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. I*, Cambridge 1996.

[14] See e.g. A. Toffler, *Future Shock*, New York 1970; D. Shenk, *Data smog. Surviving the information glut*, San Francisco 1997; P. Virilio, *La bombe informatique: essai sur les conséquences du développement de l'informatique*, Paris 1998.

[15] See e.g. A. Calcutt, *White Noise. An AZ of Contradictions of Cyberculture*, London 1999; K. Albrecht, *The True Information Survival Skills*, "Training & Development", Vol. 55, No. 2, 2001, pp. 24–30.

a contribution to further more profound and organized scientific research. This is surprising because the factor that causes the infophobia, which is information, is ubiquitous and affects everyone. What is more, it is even more astonishing due to the fact that there are professional studies of various types of phobias caused by miscellaneous agents. That is the reason why the problem of the phobia of information appears to be highly intriguing and worth an intense interest.

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Infofobia – identyfikacja pojęcia i charakterystyka zjawiska

Streszczenie: Autor artykułu przedstawia koncept infofobii i charakteryzuje to zjawisko. Ukazuje podstawy fobii informacyjnej w postaci technofobii i lęku przed informacją oraz prezentuje ją jako chorobę informacyjną. Wskazane są czynniki wywołujące infofobię, takie jak niedostatek informacji i przeciążenie informacyjne, źródła informacji, nośniki informacji, kanały informacyjne i procesy informacyjne. Wreszcie zaprezentowane są konsekwencje tego zjawiska, a mianowicie wykluczenie cyfrowe (e-wykluczenie), wykluczenie informacyjne i analfabetyzm informacyjny.

Słowa kluczowe: infofobia, technofobia, lęk przed informacją, społeczeństwo informacyjne, choroba informacyjna