Information Avoidance Experienced by Academic Librarians in USA

A Phenomenological Hermeneutic Approach

Viktor Isaksson

Institutionen för ABM
Uppsatser inom biblioteks- & informationsvetenskap ISSN 1650-4267
Masteruppsats, 30 högskolepoäng, 2014, nr 643
Författare/Author
Viktor Isaksson

English Title
Information Avoidance Experienced by Academic Librarians in USA: A Phenomenological Hermeneutic Approach.

Svensk titel
Informationsundvikande som fenomenet upplevs av universitetsbibliotekarier i USA: En studie med utgångspunkt i fenomenologisk hermeneutik.

Handledare/Supervisor
Urban Ericsson

Abstract
This master’s thesis describes and analyses the experiences and beliefs of academic librarians working at universities in USA in relation to the phenomenon information avoidance.

Heidegger’s, Gadamer’s, and Ricoeur’s theories about hermeneutics and phenomenology are used as a basis for the interpretations and the method in the investigation. The method is in part a thematic analysis and the results of this analysis are interpreted and discussed. Hayden White’s model for narrative modes is also used in some parts of the analysis. Heidegger’s theories are used in relation to the interpretation of texts and of human behavior.

The librarians believe that information avoidance is caused by information overload, lack of time, indolence, fear and lack of interest in the information’s content. They also believe that customized search results and customized news on the Internet can lead to information avoidance and that people can have a tendency to avoid information that contradicts what they already believe and their opinions.

The librarians claim to have different experiences and beliefs in relation to information avoidance; some have much experiences of it also among students at the universities, while others have less or no experiences of the phenomenon and don’t consider it to be a major problem. Finally a ”scale” is suggested for the evaluation of an individual’s level of desire to avoid information.

This is a two years master’s thesis in Archive, Library and Museum studies.

Abstract på svenska
Denna masteruppsats beskriver och analyserar hur fenomenet informationsundvikande upplevs av universitetsbibliotekarier i USA och vilka uppfattningar de har om orsakerna till fenomenet.

Heideggers, Gadamers och Ricoeurs teorier om hermeneutik och fenomenologi ligger till grund för tolkningarna och metoden i undersökningen. Metoden är delves en tematisk analys vars resultat tolkas och diskuteras. Hayden White’s modell för narrativa ”modes”, eller förhållningsstätt, används också i delar av analysen. Heideggers teorier används i relation till tolkningen av texter och människors beteende.

Bibliotekarierna tror att informationsundvikande bland annat orsakas av informationsöverföd, brist på tid och begränsat intresse, lättja och rädsla. De tror även att användaranpassade sökresultat och nyheter på Internet kan leda till informationsundvikande och att människor kan ha en tendens att undika information som motsäger vad de redan tror och deras åsikter.

Bibliotekarierna uppger att de har olika erfarenheter av och uppfattningar om informationsundvikande; några har mycket erfarenhet av informationsundvikande även bland studenter vid universiteten, medan andra har mindre eller inga erfarenheter av fenomenet och anser inte att det är ett stort problem. Slutligen föreslås en ”skala” för bedömning av individers grad av vilja att undvika information.

Det här är en två-årig masteruppsats i Arkiv-, Biblioteks- och Museivetenskap.

Ämnesord
Informationbeteende, informationsteori, informationskompetens, informationsvetenskap, universitet, bibliotekarier.

Key words
Information behavior, Information theory, Information literacy, Information science, Universities and colleges, Librarians.
# Table of contents

**Introduction** .......................................................................................................................... 5

**Purpose of the study** ............................................................................................................. 6
- Research questions.................................................................................................................. 6
- Participants............................................................................................................................. 7
- Definition of information avoidance....................................................................................... 8

**Previous research** ................................................................................................................. 9

**Theoretical approach** ............................................................................................................ 14
- Hermeneutics.......................................................................................................................... 14
  - Origins of hermeneutics.......................................................................................................... 14
  - Influence of phenomenology................................................................................................. 15
  - Martin Heidegger.................................................................................................................. 15
  - Hans-Georg Gadamer............................................................................................................ 19
  - Paul Ricoeur........................................................................................................................ 21

**Method** .................................................................................................................................. 23
- Choice of method..................................................................................................................... 24
- Advantages of the method....................................................................................................... 25
- Limitations and weaknesses of the method............................................................................. 26
- Ethical considerations.............................................................................................................. 27
- Reference system for the librarians’ emails.......................................................................... 28
- Data collection......................................................................................................................... 28
- Data analysis........................................................................................................................... 30

**Investigation** ....................................................................................................................... 35
- Interpretation of the notion "information avoidance"............................................................. 35
  - The effect of the survey questions on the answers............................................................... 37
  - Is information avoidance always negative?........................................................................... 38
  - Is information avoidance real and a problem?..................................................................... 39
  - "Inauthentic" understanding of information avoidance....................................................... 41
- Interpretation of information avoidance behavior................................................................. 43
  - Interpretation of limited experience................................................................................... 43
- Information avoidance narratives as "romance"..................................................................... 46
- Imposed information avoidance............................................................................................... 47
- Accidental information gathering............................................................................................ 49
- Information overload............................................................................................................... 50
  - Information avoidance in the "information age"................................................................. 51
- Lack of information literacy.................................................................................................... 52
- Lack of time, lack of interest, or indolence............................................................................. 53
- Excessive quantity of options................................................................................................. 57
Information avoidance narrated as "tragedy" ..................................................58
Demographic factors .........................................................................................59
Emotions causing information avoidance .........................................................60
  Fear ....................................................................................................................62
Avoidance of information contradicting beliefs ..............................................66
  The Internet Filter Bubble................................................................................68
Degrees of information avoidance .................................................................68
  Scale for level of desire to seek or avoid information .......................................69

Discussion ........................................................................................................71

Summary ...........................................................................................................76

References .........................................................................................................77
  Unpublished material .......................................................................................77
  Published material ..........................................................................................78
Introduction

It is commonly assumed, at least in Western culture, that people have a tendency to seek knowledge and information (Case et al. 2005, p. 354). At the same time, most people would probably acknowledge that they also at times avoid, or try to avoid, information. We might want to avoid, and in fact avoid, information that contradict our opinions or our firmly held beliefs, or information that has a content that cause fear or anxiety. We might also desire to avoid some of the information that is present in our daily life, for instance information we might consider annoying or irrelevant, as some of the advertising we are exposed to that contain some form of information.

The intention of this essay is to investigate the beliefs and experiences of academic librarians working at universities in USA regarding the phenomenon information avoidance.

The librarians in the survey in the investigation claim that they believe that people’s information avoidance could be caused by lack of time, lack of interest in the content of the information, information overload, fear, and customized search results on the Internet. According to the librarians people might also have a tendency to avoid information that contradicts their beliefs and opinions. The librarians have quite different experiences of information avoidance both inside and outside of the university context, and they interpret these experiences differently. They also have different opinions about how common information avoidance is, in particular at the university, and have different opinions about how important this problem is, or if it is a problem at all.

The chapter "Previous research" is an overview of different research or theories relating to information avoidance. In some cases it concerns some issues and themes that not always are directly or frequently connected to what the librarians in the investigation claim that they have experiences of or what they believe are the reasons why people avoid information. What is of interest in this essay is not only which research or what theories the librarians mention, but also what they don’t mention, and, possibly, what they are less familiar with.

I would like to express my gratitude to all the librarians who have participated in the survey.
Purpose of the study

The purpose of the essay is to investigate how academic librarians working at universities in USA experience the phenomenon information avoidance. The intention is to investigate the librarians’ beliefs about the reasons for information avoidance among people in general as well as among students and library patrons. Another aim is to investigate the librarians’ experiences of information avoidance, both inside and outside of the university and library. The librarians’ perceptions and experiences are compared to and interpreted in relation to previous research about information avoidance.

The intention of the investigation is also to serve as a basis for further studies about information avoidance. For instance, quantitative research methods could be used to investigate to what degree the beliefs about information avoidance which are expressed by the librarians in this study are common among librarians in general, as well as among other professionals working with information, knowledge, and education.

All the librarians’ beliefs and experiences in relation to information avoidance, including beliefs and experiences not relating to the library, are included in this study. Hence, the subject of study is the librarians’ experiences of and beliefs about information avoidance in all aspects and contexts of life. The librarians’ experiences in relation to the library are only part of the study.

Research questions

The main research questions are the following: Why do the librarians believe that people in general, as well as students and library patrons, avoid information? What are the librarians’ experiences of information avoidance in the library and university and in other situations and contexts?

It would have been an option to limit these questions to only deal with the librarians’ experiences from their work. There are several reasons for not limiting the investigation in such a manner. One reason for this is that the libraries and universities not are separated from the rest of society. Another reason is that both information seeking and avoidance occur in various situations in life and in many contexts. Most individuals’ behavior in relation to information is not restricted to
what they may or may not seek at the library. For instance, a student at the university might avoid the library and all the information available there and exclusively seek information through other sources. Since the library is only one of many information sources from which information could be obtained or avoided, and because it seems likely that there are various reasons for information avoidance that have no connection to the libraries or universities, it would arguably not be the best approach to study only information avoidance in, and in relation to, the library.

Another reason for asking the librarians about their perceptions of how and why people in general avoid information rather than asking them exclusively about their perception of students’ and library patrons’ information avoidance is that people, including librarians, don’t really know with any certainty when and why other people avoid information. The only information avoidance the librarians really know something about is their own. In some cases the librarians in fact, in their answers in the survey, write about what they claim are the reasons for their own information avoidance. But it is also possible that some of the librarians who don’t state that they personally avoid information in fact sometimes include themselves in ”people” when they write about the reasons why people avoid information.

Participants

Librarians were considered to be a suitable group for this research since it seemed likely that many librarians could have experiences of the behavior of people in relation to information, and could, because of this, possibly also have some experiences of information avoidance. Since librarians work with information and people relating to information they might also reflect not exclusively on information seeking but also, possibly, on avoidance of information. Librarians in general seemed to be a too disparate group since different librarians might have quite different experiences of information avoidance depending, for instance, on which type of library they worked at. Experiences, perceptions, and beliefs about information avoidance, as well as the phenomenon itself, might also differ depending on the country and culture in which the librarian lives. This investigation has been directed towards librarians working at universities in USA. Obviously, the locations where the librarians live in USA, differences of the universities in which the librarians work, as well as many other factors might also have an effect on if or how they experience information avoidance.
Definition of information avoidance

The notion “information” is defined and used differently depending on the contexts. Information can be understood as something that represents or indicates knowledge, and often also as something having a sender and a receiver. Another understanding of information is broader, and includes data that could be encountered in the environment, including sensory perceptions, such as sounds, smells, and tactile and visual phenomena, and includes unintentionally communicated information. The individual being informed in this way may not be particularly goal oriented in his or her information seeking, but instead is informed more or less unintentionally by the surrounding information, which in turn, might not consciously or intentionally be sending the information to the receiver. The meaning of information can also be understood as, in as sense, being created by, or depending on, the individual who is being informed (McCreadie & Rice, p. 46-49).

In this essay all these understandings of information are considered valid but at the same time the librarians in the investigation, while expressing themselves regarding information, often seem to refer to information containing knowledge, and sometimes exclusively knowledge in relation to education.

"Information avoidance", in this essay, is defined as the avoidance of information, for whatever reason. By "avoidance" of information is here meant a decision not to seek, receive, or learn the content of certain information. The decision to avoid information doesn’t have to be based on a particularly strong desire.

Information avoidance can be either active or passive. It is active for instance when a person asks someone not to reveal information. It is passive for example when an individual don’t ask a question that would reveal the information (Sweeny et al. 2010, p. 341). This second ”passive” type of information avoidance is by far the most common. People constantly avoid asking questions that could reveal information, and decide, often without thinking much about it, not to seek information.
Previous research

Most of the research on communication has focused primarily on the searching and seeking of information rather than on the avoidance of it. In psychology and in health related research information avoidance has received more attention (Case et al. 2005, p. 354; Sweeny et al. 2010).

In the article "Avoiding versus seeking: the relationship of information seeking to avoidance, blunting, coping, dissonance, and related concepts" the authors claim that the supposition that people have a tendency and even a desire to seek information has ancient origins and is profoundly rooted in Western culture (Case et al. 2005, p. 354). An example of an early expression of this view is Aristotle’s declaration in Metaphysics (350 B.C.) that “ALL men by nature desire to know” (Aristotle 2001, p. 1). Donald O. Case and colleagues argue in their article that in present time and in contemporary research it is also often assumed that people desire knowledge and tend to seek information when they are ignorant about a subject (Case et al. 2005, p. 354). Carol C. Kuhlthau claims that the information seeking process is initiated by uncertainty, caused by a lack of understanding (1993, p. 343). Case and colleagues remark that in several models of the information-seeking process, such as for instance in David Ellis’s and Kuhlthau’s, it is not mentioned or taken into consideration that information seeking may not always occur when an individual is consciously unaware about an issue (Case et al. 2005, p. 354).

The human tendency to avoid unpleasant and disagreeable memories and thoughts which might be considered knowledge and information has a comparatively long history of analysis and study in psychology. In his theory of the psychological defense mechanisms Freud elaborates on how the human mind can avoid, or try to avoid, certain disagreeable information, knowledge, or awareness (Case et al. 2005, p. 354).

Hyman and Sheatsley observed in their studies that people have a tendency to seek information consistent with their prior beliefs and opinions, and that they tend to avoid information contradicting these beliefs. They also claim that interested people acquire more information than uninterested people and that the same information is interpreted differently by different groups in society (Hyman & Sheatsley 1947, p. 412).

The discomfort that could be experienced by an individual while being exposed to information contradicting his or her beliefs, opinions, or emotions was called
"cognitive dissonance" by Leon Festinger. An individual in a state of cognitive dissonance may, according to Festinger, experience a number of disagreeable sensations and emotions, such as anxiety, fear, and frustration. Festinger claims that cognitive dissonance is emotionally uncomfortable, motivating the person who experiences the dissonance to try to reduce it to achieve consistency or "consohnance". Festinger also believes that when an individual experiences cognitive dissonance he or she will avoid information and situations that seem likely to increase the dissonance (1962, 2-5).

Experiments by Dieter Frey indicated that people’s preference to seek information consistent with their prior beliefs depends on the seriousness of the situation and on whether there exists a possibility to do something to change the result (1982, 1179-1183). Irving Janis and Seymour Feshback suggested that a mass communication message about a threat that provoked fear and psychological tension in the audience motivated it to ignore the information which was being presented and to minimize the severity of the threat. Janis and Feshback claimed that the reason for this was that if the threat was intense enough, or if the possible responses to the threat not were perceived as effective, it would appear as a convenient option to ignore the threat and the information concerning it (1953, p. 92).

According to some psychologists and researchers information avoidance may depend as much, if not more, on the personality traits of the individual as on the situation the individual is facing. Milton Rokeach distinguishes between people with "open" and "closed" minds. Individuals with a closed mind have a higher tendency to avoid information than individuals with an open mind, according to Rokeach (Case et al. 2005, p. 355).

Rokeach defines dogmatism as a system of beliefs and disbeliefs about reality based on a number of essential beliefs about a permanent, unchanging authority. He claims that there exist political and religious dogmatism, and that dogmatism also can be present for instance in science and philosophy, as well as in many other contexts and activities in society. According to Rokeach are dogmatic views resistant to objective evidence and logical reasoning, but if there is a change in the beliefs of the authority of the dogmatic belief system the beliefs within this system are also likely to change and the individual with the dogmatic views will then agree to the changes in beliefs since these are accepted by the authority of the belief system (1954, p. 194-199).

The higher the level of dogmatism, the higher is the individual’s tendency to deny information that contradicts the dogmatic belief system. A higher level of dogmatism within a belief system will also result in a rejection of similar belief systems that will be perceived as threatening. For instance, increasing dogmatism among the believers of one interpretation of Christianity will increase their rejection of other Christian belief systems, while an increase in dogmatism within one political ideology will increase its rejection of similar ideologies more than its rejec-
tion of ideologies opposed to it. The higher the degree of dogmatism is within a belief system the more similar will various "disbelief" systems be perceived (Rokeach 1954, p. 197-199).

Rokeach claims that the higher the degree of dogmatism, the higher is the tendency for "cognitive narrowing", that could manifest itself in the avoidance of people or events, or information in form of written texts, which contradict the belief system. Censorship of books or news media expressing views contrary to a dogmatic belief system or in favor of a disbelief system is an example of cognitive narrowing. An individual may achieve cognitive narrowing by avoiding exposure to information and ideas which could threaten or weaken the individual’s belief system, and only allow contact with opinions and thoughts in agreement with that belief system (Rokeach 1954, p. 199-200).

In the article "The open and closed mind: a review of dogmatism" a number of studies are mentioned that essentially support Rokeach’s theories, indicating for instance that less dogmatic individuals have a more realistic perception of authority figures, acknowledging both their positive and negative qualities, and that members of religious groups who are dependent on authority have a low tolerance for the expression of opinions contrary to their religious beliefs (Vacchiano, Strauss & Hochman 1969, p. 261-262). Lengermann’s and D’Antonio’s investigation indicates that religion has more influence on an individual’s level of dogmatism than education (1963, p. 153-155).

In the 1980s psychologists developed the concept that individuals have different information-seeking styles (Case et al. 2005, p. 355). Based on how people dealt with threat related situations people were categorized as ”monitors” (information seekers) or ”blunters” (distractors) (Miller 1987, p. 345). Monitors are people who search through the environment to find threats, while blunters try to avoid or distract themselves from intimidating information (Case et al. 2005, p. 355). Monitors pay attention to what is occurring in the threatening situation and seek information about it by asking people, reading books, or seek information about the situation using other sources of information. Monitors also seek information within their past experiences recalling prior, comparable or analogous situations. Blunters, on the other hand, try to forget the situation, avoid thinking about it, direct their attention towards something else, or distract themselves with agreeable activities. Blunters also tend to believe that the threatening situation is less serious than it seems (Muris et al. 1994, p. 14-18).

Instruments have been developed to measure individuals’ degrees of monitoring and blunting. The Miller Behavioral Style Scale (MBSS) is a questionnaire that distinguishes between high and low monitors and high and low blunters (Miller 1987, p. 346). The questionnaire presents four scenarios (dentist, hostage, dismissal, and airplane) involving stress, anxiety or fear, followed by eight statements. The respondents select the statements that are in accordance with what they be-
lieve they would do if they would be in the situation described in the scenario (Muris et al. 1994, p. 9). The selection of statements such as “I would go to the movies to take my mind off things” and “I would try to sleep” would be characteristic of a blunter (Case et al. 2005, p. 355).

Uncertainty management theory focuses on how individuals occasionally intentionally increase their uncertainty. According to the theory uncertainty is not always perceived as undesirable or inconvenient, and rather than reducing uncertainty people may deliberately at times increase their uncertainty (Case et al. 2005, p. 355-356). Uncertainty can be used as a tool or cognitive state which could be cultivated when increasing probability is associated with an increasing threat of a danger or of some unpleasant and undesired possibility (Bradac 2001, p. 463).

The avoidance of information in relation to illnesses and to health protection has received some scientific attention, perhaps because of the importance of these issues, since avoidance of health related information in some cases may have very serious consequences. Case and colleagues state in their article that Johnson’s “Comprehensive Model of Information Seeking” (CMIS) was developed in relation to information seeking about cancer, and that the model leaves room for the possibility that an individual might consciously or unconsciously avoid information (2005, p. 358). According to Johnson’s model ”antecedents” are the factors that determine people’s information seeking behavior. The four principal antecedents are “demographics”, “personal experience”, “salience”, and “beliefs”. Demographics include for instance socioeconomic status. People living in poverty generally have a lower probability to survive cancer, and Johnson and colleagues suggest that this in part is a consequence of that these individuals often have less knowledge about cancer than wealthier individuals, as well as less knowledge about the symptoms and about the health care system, and a higher propensity to rely on alternative treatments and folk medicine. An individual’s experiences can also affect the individual’s tendency to seek cancer related information, For instance can an individual decide to seek information about cancer after experiencing that a family member died from cancer. Salience refers to the meaning and importance of cancer-related information as it is understood and perceived by the individual. For instance, the perception of the risk to the individual’s health can influence the individual’s decision to seek or not seek information. People’s beliefs may also affect their tendencies to seek or avoid information related to cancer. The belief that cancer inevitably lead to death, and the feeling of a lack of control, may result in avoidance of information about cancer. Behaviors related to health issues, for instance in relation to genetic information about cancer, also need to be accepted in the society and culture in which the individuals live (Johnson, Andrews & Allard 2001, p. 339-341).

Jung, Ramanadhan, and Viswanath claim that social factors, such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, are linked to cancer survivors’ health differences,
and suggest that these differences in part are owing to diverse inclinations and pre-dispositions to seek or avoid cancer related information. Jung and colleagues acknowledge that information seeking and avoidance can be affected both by psychological factors and the social context, but argue that the facts that people with lower education or income more frequently are “non-seekers” of cancer related information and that the types of information that is searched for depend on social determinants demonstrate that these issues deserve more attention (Jung, Ramanadhan & Viswanath 2013, p. 105).

Dawson’s, Savitsky’s, and Dunning’s studies suggest, perhaps not surprisingly, that people are more willing to undergo diagnostic testing for illnesses that they believe are serious but treatable than serious illnesses that they believe have no treatment or cure (2006, p. 751). Cutler and Hodgson examined the interest in genetic testing for Alzheimer’s disease based on a hypothetical scenario in which the accuracy of the test would be 100 percent. Among the investigated subjects it was the lack of effective treatment for Alzheimer’s disease, the possibilities of discrimination from employers and loss of health insurance that were considered to be the most important reasons not to do the test (Cutler & Hodgson 2003, p. 9, 16). Studies indicate that people believing that cancer almost certainly leads to death, a belief called ”cancer fatalism” in the article, are more inclined to avoid cancer information than people who believe cancer often is treatable. Since people with a high degree of cancer fatalism avoid information related to cancer, they may not learn about new treatments for cancer and because of this remain cancer fatalists and continue to avoid information about cancer (Miles et al. 2008, p. 1872). As is demonstrated by these studies, people might prefer to avoid information, in particular in relation to health and illnesses, when they believe nothing could be done to change the outcome.
Theoretical approach

The investigation is based on email messages sent by librarians describing their experiences and beliefs regarding information avoidance. Since the data that the analysis is based on are written texts, the email messages sent by the librarians, a hermeneutic approach to interpret the messages seemed adequate. The hermeneutic approach that has been used is in part based on Martin Heidegger’s, Hans-Georg Gadamer’s and Paul Ricoeur’s theories about hermeneutics, which in turn are influenced by phenomenology. The theoretical approach could hence be considered or called "phenomenological hermeneutics".

Hermeneutics

The word "hermeneutics" originates from the Greek word "hermeneuin" which signifies "interpret" (Moran 2000, p. 271). Ricoeur writes that the word "hermeneutics" often refers to the rules for interpretation of written documents (1971, p. 529). Hermeneutics of texts traditionally means analyzing the relation of parts of a text to the whole text and to its context (Day 2010, p. 177).

Hermeneutics also refers to the philosophy of understanding. In hermeneutics human actions can also be subject to interpretation (Wiklund, Lindholm & Lindström 2002, p. 115).

Origins of hermeneutics

One of the earliest texts on hermeneutics is Aristotle’s Peri hermeneias (On Interpretation) which explains some ways to understand statements and sentences (Moran 2000, p. 271).

St Augustine’s On Christian Doctrine (De doctrina Christiana) is an early text on hermeneutics, which later influenced Heidegger’s thinking. In On Christian Doctrine St Augustine presents principles for the interpretation of the Bible. He claims, for instance, that a part, such as a sentence of the Bible, should be comprehended in relation to the whole, to the entire text of the Bible and its context (Moran 2000, p. 272.).

Friedrich Schleiermacher, who developed hermeneutics into a separate discipline in the nineteenth century, proposed to determine the original intentions of the
authors of the New Testament. Schleiermacher believed that hermeneutics could reach a full understanding of the original text and that the interpretation could recover the past as it occurred (Moran 2000, p. 274-275).

Wilhelm Dilthey, who developed Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic theory further, intended to make hermeneutics the method of all the social sciences. Dilthey made a distinction between causal explanation ("Erklärung") and hermeneutic understanding ("Verstehen") (Moran 2000, p. 276). Dilthey believed that our understanding is based on language, norms in society, and our cultural context. When we are interpreting a text, according to Dilthey, we understand it by a movement from the text itself to the author’s social and historical context and then back to the text again. This is similar to the theory of the "hermeneutic circle", developed for instance by Heidegger, but understanding, to Dilthey, is a way of knowing rather than a way of being (Tan, Wilson & Olver 2009, p. 3).

**Influence of phenomenology**
Phenomenology has had a profound influence on the development of hermeneutics, in particular on Heidegger’s theories (Moran 2000, p. 234-236).

Edmund Husserl, who introduced phenomenology as a new way of doing philosophy, claimed that phenomenology describes things as they appear to consciousness. The objective of phenomenology, according to Husserl, was to find the essential, universal truths (Moran 2000, p. 60, 135).

Husserl expressed the belief that pure experiences are inhibited by practical concerns, engagement with experience in ordinary life, folk suppositions, and even assumptions based on of scientific knowledge and information. Husserl believed that to reach the essence of the investigated phenomena, the phenomenological practice required the use of a number of "reductions" leading to the suspension, or "bracketing", of all assumptions, presumptions and beliefs, including common sense, logical, mathematical, philosophical, scientific, and cultural, as well as all natural attitudes towards the world. In the pure phenomenological practice proposed by Husserl, no assumption about anything is allowed. Husserl uses the word "epoché" for the suspension of all beliefs and ordinary thinking in the manner he claimed necessary in phenomenological practice (Moran 2000, p. 11-12, 147-148).

The possibility to perform reduction, in particular complete reduction, has been questioned or rejected even by philosophers considered phenomenologists. According to Heidegger, for instance, complete reduction is impossible (Moran 2000, p. 161-162).

**Martin Heidegger**
Heidegger's view or version of phenomenology, sometimes called "hermeneutic phenomenology", differs from Husserl’s phenomenology in several critical areas (Kafle 2011, p. 186-187). Heidegger believes that phenomenology must consider
the human existence within and in relation to time, history and tradition. By tradition Heidegger means the constant process where different thoughts and beliefs become absorbed into the general consensus, which, according to Heidegger, usually is the basis for our understanding (Moran 2000, p. 20-21, 230, 234-236). Individuality and individuals are comprehended by Heidegger as socially, culturally, and historically constructed by language, traditions, and customs (Day 2010, p. 177).

Heidegger also asserts that all description, including the description in phenomenological practice, involves interpretation (Moran 2000, p. 20-21). According to Heidegger we are constantly engaged in interpreting the world and our existence (Moran 2000, p. 234). The pure description Husserl proposed to be used in phenomenology, which not includes interpretation, is perceived as impossible to Heidegger (Moran 2000, p. 20-21). According to hermeneutic phenomenology is description itself a process of interpretation, and it is not possible to suspend beliefs and opinions (Kafle 2011, p. 186-187). Phenomenology, to Heidegger, is not simply description, but rather the seeking of meaning. Interpretation, hermeneutics, may be used to seek the meaning of a text, for instance, and to Heidegger there is a connection between phenomenology and hermeneutics (Moran 2000, p. 20-21, 229).

In Sein und Zeit, in English Being and Time (1996), which originally was published in 1927, Heidegger introduces several neologisms. Some of these neologisms will not be used in the remainder of this essay, but since it is arguably necessary to have some basic understanding of a few of them to be able to understand what Heidegger means, an attempt will be made to briefly explain some of them, as well as some parts of his theories.

According to Heidegger we don’t first perceive a thing, for instance, as a table, a car, or whatever, and then, subsequently, interpret it (Heidegger 1996, p. 139-140). Instead we perceive of things and phenomena in the world as they already are interpreted and understood (Moran 2000, p. 277). Heidegger claims that our interpretations are based on a "fore-having" ("Vorhabe") (Heidegger 1996, p. 140; Moran 2000, p. 277). "Fore-having" is something we have in advance, before our interpretation (Moran 2000, p. 277). When we interpret and understand things we also have certain expectations on them; referring to these expectations Heidegger uses the terms "fore-sight" ("Vorsicht") "pre-grasp" ("Vorgriff"), a "fore-conception", which are pre-judgments or assumptions about the things we are trying to interpret and understand (Heidegger 1996, p. 214; Moran 2000, p. 236, 277).

Heidegger’s most frequently used neologism in Being and Time is "Dasein" (or "Da-sein"), and it is probably his most important concept, since it is in relation to Dasein most of his other concepts and theories are explained (1996). Heidegger writes in Being and Time that "Da-sein is the being which I myself always am’’
According to Heidegger we tend to accept and also often pass along much of the information and alleged knowledge that is presented to us without thinking about it or about the meaning of this knowledge and information. On these occasions we all experience in a similar way, as "one does", as everyone does, according to Heidegger (Moran 2000, p. 239-240). Our understanding, claims Heidegger, is usually based on a common consensus, a kind of "public knowledge" Heidegger calls "Öffentlichkeit" (Heidegger 1996, p. 119, 156; Moran 2000, p. 120). Heidegger further develops the notion "Gerede", "idle talk" (Heidegger 1996, p. 157-166; Moran 2000, p. 120). "Idle talk", should not, according to Heidegger, be understood as having a negative meaning (Heidegger 1996, p. 157). The way things are "publicly interpreted" is expressed in idle talk (Heidegger 1962, p. 253).
When we are involved in "idle talk" we don’t really absorb the meaning of the information we receive and pass on, as, for instance, when we are informed of a number of deaths in an accident but don’t completely understand the experience of the event of which we are informed. This way of thinking and understanding is "inauthentic", we understand "symbolically" as when we are doing mathematical calculations (Moran 2000, p. 120).

According to Heidegger our usual, everyday, state and understanding is "inauthentic". When we are inauthentic our innermost being is not affected (Heidegger 1996, p. 137, 164; Moran 2000, p. 239-240). We experience authentically when we experience profoundly and personally; this may for instance occur when we reflect on our own death or experience fear or anxiety (Moran 2000, p. 237-238). In our usual inauthentic state we don’t question or preoccupy ourselves with the meaning of occurrences and are not excessively engaged in what happens (Moran 2000, p. 239-240). But, to Heidegger, being "inauthentic" is how life normally is lived and is not negative or related to being morally flawed (Moran 2000, p. 239-242).

Heidegger claims that our initial understanding not primarily has its origin in theoretical contemplation of the things in our world. Instead is our understanding initially based on our practical engagement with the world, and in our dealing with the world we are constantly interpreting it. According to Heidegger, we understand the world through our practical behavior with things within it. We manipulate and use things and understand them in relation to their utility (Moran 2000, p. 233). Heidegger calls the availability of things "Zuhandensein", "readiness to hand", or "ready-to-hand" (Moran 2000, p. 233; Day 2010 p. 184). Day, explaining Heidegger’s theories in relation to library and information science, writes that information, in its modern sense, is "ready-to-hand" knowledge, and that the meaning of this information already is known beforehand (2010, p. 184).

After the understanding formed by our practical encounter with the things in the world it is possible to understand the things theoretically. The things are then seen as "present at hand" ("vorhandene"), as free-standing, and they can then be studied for instance scientifically (Moran 2000, p. 233).

According to Heidegger our practical encounter with things is contained in our use of language. Heidegger believes that rather than seeing the objects and things in our surrounding and the world we first talk about them; instead of speaking about what we see and perceive we tend to see what is said and spoken about the things and phenomena in the world (Moran 2000, p. 234).

Heidegger claims that to be able to reach understanding, we first need to formulate a question about the topic we are trying to understand. To be able to formulate a question about any topic we must first have some understanding, or presupposition, about the topic. The answers to the question oblige us to examine and revise our initial understanding or preconception. Heidegger, using a concept from
Schleiermacher, calls this "the hermeneutic circle" (Moran 2000, p. 237-238, 269, 276-277).

Heidegger criticizes modern science and scientific research in which researchers, who are supported by institutions and by funding and publishing agents, do empirical research on already determined and established subjects using previously established approaches, perspectives, and outlooks (Day 2010, p 178).

Heidegger claims that we understand in relation to time and history, and to better understand Heidegger and his philosophy it is arguably helpful to have some knowledge about his own role and behavior in history. Particularly Heidegger’s activities from 1933 to 1945, the period during which the Nazis remained in power in Germany, as well as his opinions during and after this period have received a good deal of attention (Moran 2000, p. 210-214, 219-221). Heidegger, who had approved of the Nazis since the late 1920s, joined the Nazi party in 1933, and was actively supporting the Nazi policy, for instance during his time as Rektor of Freiburg University, and, while the Nazis were in power, denounced other professors to the Gestapo. What today may be of most interest, at least in this context, is to what degree, how, and during which periods, Heidegger’s philosophy was influenced by the Nazi ideology. Many of the philosophers who themselves were influenced by Heidegger’s thinking, such as Levinas, Derrida and Gadamer, have tried to question the effect of Heidegger’s political views and activities on his philosophy. On the other hand, Victor Farías and Dermot Moran, among many others claim that it is a mistake to believe that Heidegger’s philosophy should be treated and understood completely separately from Heidegger’s political opinions, beliefs and activities (Day 2010, p. 173; Moran 2000, p. 219-221). Moran argues that even though Being and Time not is a proposal of the political or ideological view of Nazism, some elements similar to or characteristic of Nazism are present, such as the encouragement to "choose a hero", to commit to devoted and loyal following, obedience and submission, and to participate in "struggle" ("Kampf") (Moran 2000, p. 219-221, 243).

Hans-Georg Gadamer
To Gadamer, hermeneutics is a constant process of understanding that can never be complete, and he believes that human beings are involved in a continuous attempt to understand the world. According to Gadamer hermeneutics is present in all parts and aspects of human life (Moran 2000, p. 248-251).

Philosophy, to Gadamer, has a dialogical character; it is a conversation leading to common understanding which Gadamer believes results in the appearance of something real, and something beyond the intentions of the speakers, since a true dialogue, according to Gadamer, never is the one the speakers wanted to conduct (Moran 2000, p. 249).
Gadamer also believes that reality only is revealed in language (Moran 2000, p. 248-249). According to Gadamer we understand through language, and he further claims that language never can be neutral; instead it is influenced and shaped by the system of values of the culture in which it exists (Moran 2000, p. 270).

Gadamer claims that our understanding is determined by our "prejudices" ("Vorurteil"), by which he means our "prejudgments" or presuppositions (Moran 2000, p. 252). Gadamer claims that we always use our presumptions or "prejudices" in the processes leading to understanding. Our "prejudices", according to Gadamer, don’t prevent us from reaching the truth or understanding but are instead the necessary foundation from which we initiate our attempt at attaining new understanding. Gadamer, in agreement with Heidegger, believes that we always initiate our attempts at understanding something with some previous understanding or misunderstanding and this initial belief enables us to formulate questions in relation to the subject or theme we are trying to understand (Moran 2000, p. 278).

Gadamer also opposes the validity of Dilthey’s distinction between scientific explanation ("Erklärung"), and cultural understanding ("Verstehen") (Moran 2000, p. 251). Gadamer believes that all understanding, including scientific explanation, occurs in a context, in an existing tradition ("Überlieferung"), and originates from a perspective, a point of view (Moran 2000, p. 251).

According to Gadamer, we should be completely open to new possibilities when we are trying to understand, while we at the same time are relying on and respecting our previous presumptions and prejudices. The possibility to do this has been questioned by Jürgen Habermas in his criticism of Gadamer’s hermeneutics (Moran 2000, p. 251-252).

Gadamer believes that understanding is reached within a dialogue rather than with one position or view of reality dominating the other. Contrary to Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault Gadamer rejects the idea that the aim at achieving common understanding is in fact an attempt to implement control and power (Moran 2000, p. 253). Gadamer further believes that we need to believe that the person we are trying to understand has good intentions (Moran 2000, p. 251). Gadamer’s hermeneutics has been criticized for being overly based on trust and to not leave enough room for suspicion, for instance of what is presented as "culture" or "tradition" (Moran 2000, p. 253).

Even though Gadamer claims he is not against science, he believes that the "truth" that is told by science entails a particular perspective in relation to the world that should not be considered the only one or the whole truth, and he affirms that what is perceived as truth shouldn’t be limited to what could be obtained through the use of scientific method (Moran 2000, p. 266).

During the Nazi period Gadamer was living in Germany where he was teaching philosophy, and even though he didn’t actively join the Nazi party Gadamer lived quite comfortably in Germany and his career prospered during the time Hitler was
in power (Moran 2000, p. 261-264). Moran writes that it seems as if Gadamer didn’t learn from the Nazi period that a culture can be distorted through its wish to adapt and adjust to what its leaders expect from it, and that even though dialogue, in the sense given to it by Gadamer, can lead to mutual understanding, it could also function to exercise domination and power. Moran further states that Gadamer, according to him, seems to be totally mistaken in assuming that mutual agreement leads to knowledge or accurate understanding. Habermas has criticized Gadamer’s thinking, pointing out that it is conceivable that a whole society agrees on or is convinced of something completely erroneous (Moran 2000, p. 284-286). Habermas’s criticism of Gadamer’s theories seems to be reasonable and valid.

Gadamer’s theory on how understanding as well as misunderstanding, meaning both correct and erroneous beliefs, emerge or appear seems to be more convincing than his ideas about how a form of dialogue or conversation, with human beings or texts, results in the appearance of the ”truth”. At the same time Gadamer implies that there is no final truth, that there is nothing but interpretations, and this opinion or view of the world could be dangerous if the conclusion is that there is no right or wrong but only different ways to interpret and understand the world. Gadamer’s opinion that hermeneutics always has to be executed as a dialogue in an atmosphere of trust may also be questioned; it could arguably be possible to interpret people’s behavior and the contents of texts without trusting or believing in the good intentions of the speaker or author of the text, and, if we believe Gadamer’s assertion that we constantly are interpreting the world, such interpretations occur all the time and it may seem unconvincing that suspicious interpreters who perhaps are doubting the good intentions of the speaker or author of the text necessarily are less capable of performing interpretations than interpreters who trust the good intentions of the speaker or author of the text. In fact, lack of trust may arguably be desired from the interpreters of some texts.

Paul Ricoeur

Ricoeur claims that interpreting a text is to understand the meaning of the text in itself instead of understanding the intentions of the narrator (Geanellos 2000, p. 112-114).

According to Ricoeur the objective of hermeneutics is ”appropriation”. By ”appropriation” Ricoeur means that the interpretation of a text increases, changes or improves the interpreting individual’s self-understanding. Hermeneutics, explains Ricoeur, is a ”struggle against cultural distance”, a distance from the system of values the text was based on. Interpretation, claims Ricoeur, is making ”one's own” what initially was unknown, unfamiliar and ”alien” (2008, p. 114-115). Ricoeur also believes that, to understand something new, we need to use what he calls ”distanciation”, by which he means that we need to distance ourselves from our pre-understanding, prejudices or assumptions (Geanellos 2000, p. 112-114).
According to Ricoeur some interpretations are more valid, more probable, than others. Exactly how this “validation” of an interpretation is achieved is not very clear though, and Geanellos rightly notes that there is a contradiction between Ricoeur’s intent to decide which is the more correct and accurate among conflicting interpretations and his acceptance of several different interpretations (2000, p. 117-118).

The interpreter, according to Ricoeur, first makes an initial attempt, a “naive interpretation”, which is a form of qualified guess, aimed at the understanding of the text’s meaning. The ”explanation” of the text can be done, in research, using structural analysis in which the text is looked upon as a world of its own, creating a distance from preconceptions and pre-understandings (Geanellos 2000, p. 114-115).

The ”distanciation” suggested by Ricoeur might seem more realistic than Husserl’s epoché or bracketing of all assumptions about the world. It may perhaps be possible to, at least to some degree, distance oneself from one’s prejudices and presuppositions but more difficult, if not impossible, to temporarily eliminate or bracket all beliefs about reality from one’s mind.
Method

Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur propose hermeneutic theories but do not prescribe concrete methods for how these theories should be applied practically in relation to research. Narayan Kafle declares that hermeneutics doesn’t suggest a particular method or stipulate specific analytic requirements. Kafle also refers to van Manen who claims that there are no fixed methods for the use of ”hermeneutic phenomenological” research (Kafle 2011, p. 191-194). In a sense, the researcher has to interpret the hermeneutic theories to be able to base the method on the hermeneutic theories, or follow the example of a previous researcher who has interpreted the theories and conceived of a method based on this interpretation.

Kafle writes that, after all, there are some recommendations or guidelines for the use of hermeneutics in research. It is recommended that the research is dedicated and committed to the subject under investigation, is orientated towards the research question, describes the phenomenon through writing and rewriting, investigates the human experience as it is lived, and considers the parts in relation to the whole (Kafle 2011, p. 191).

The method used in this investigation is not quite what has become to be understood as ”hermeneutic phenomenology” in qualitative research but rather a hermeneutic approach in which the hermeneutics is influenced by phenomenology. The method doesn’t exclusively adhere to one philosopher’s hermeneutic theory but is instead based on or inspired by the ideas of several philosophers. The ideas of the hermeneutic philosophers are often also profoundly influenced by each other. Gadamer, for instance, is influenced by Heidegger’s theories, which are influenced by the whole hermeneutic tradition, including philosophers such as St Augustine, Schleiermacher, and Dilthey, as well as by Husserl’s phenomenology (Moran 2000, p. 226-233, 271-280).

As mentioned previously Heidegger believes that to reach understanding we must first formulate a question about the topic we are trying to understand and to be able to do this we need to have some previous understanding or conception of the subject under investigation (Moran 2000, p. 237-238, 269, 276-277). In this investigation I have begun by researching previous studies relating to information avoidance to have an initial understanding of the phenomenon and then I have formulated the research questions.
The method used in the investigation partly consists in comparing parts to the whole, to start off by knowing a part which is compared to and evaluated in relation to the whole amount of the texts or to the context, which in turn is compared to the part, as in the "hermeneutic circle" described by Heidegger (Moran 2000, p. 237-238, 269, 276-277). The texts used in the analysis are email messages sent by librarians working at universities in USA. The analysis or interpretation of these texts could at times simply mean reading a part, for instance one email message or a part of an email message, and then comparing this to the rest of the email messages. The email messages are also sometimes viewed in relation to a larger context, for instance in relation to other research or theories about information avoidance. The method is often a process of beginning by believing something, based on reading as well as writing about some part, and then, after reading about all the other parts in relation to the first part, reconsidering the initial standpoint. The understanding, using this method, will not reach and end or be complete. But even though the understanding which is the result of investigation and research doesn’t reach an end, this does not imply that research and investigation is useless or that one understanding only is replaced by another, equally valid or invalid explanation, since it may be argued that investigation might improve or expand current understanding.

The methods used in the data analysis are in part based on a thematic analysis and White’s model for narrative modes and structures. Both these methods have been applied in studies using Ricoeur’s theories in their methodological approach (Tan, Wilson, Oliver 2009; Wiklund, Lindholm & Lindström 2002). Wiklund, Lindholm, and Lindström write that even though White’s methodology concerns historical narratives, it could also be applied to other texts (2002, p. 117).

Choice of method

The method used in this investigation is not the only one possible or conceivable in a study of librarians’ experiences of information avoidance. For example, another possibility would have been to interview the subjects. Since the investigated subjects live far away and are dispersed over a large geographic area, it would have been extremely unpractical, expensive and time consuming for one individual to execute such an investigation. The interviews could of course have been executed by telephone, but this would also have been rather expensive. An option would have been to use Skype, Adobe Connect, or some similar program to communicate with the librarians during the interviews. The main reason for not using this method was that it might prove difficult to find participants. Interviews require that the respondents spend more of their time and it would seem less likely to find librarians prepared to participate using this method.
Another reason for not choosing interviews as the method of this research was that even though some librarians perhaps reflected on, or noticed, information avoidance this subject was possibly not the center of their attention or a topic that many librarians thought extensively about, and for these reasons it seemed somewhat unlikely that they could speak fluently about this theme in interviews lasting an hour or even significantly less than an hour.

Advantages of the method

One possible advantage of using the form of email questionnaire used in this survey, with the option to answer one or two questions, as the method for data collection, is that the respondents might make less efforts to impress the researcher than what might be the case in an interview, and the answers may for this reason be quite sincere. Several email answers give the impression that the respondents have written down the first associations or thoughts that entered their minds in relation to the subject of inquiry. Some respondents have also been rather sincere about what they consider their own lack of knowledge about information avoidance.

The method used in this survey, with many respondents giving quite brief answers, might be more suited for all types of responses, even the ones that are very brief, express very little, express a negative attitude to the subject of inquiry, or for instance claim that the subject of the research doesn’t exist. Librarians with little to say or a somewhat negative or indifferent attitude towards the subject of the research would be ill-suited for interviews on the subject, in particular if the intention was to talk in depth on the issue for over an hour, but their views on the topic in written form sent as emails are perfectly useful contributions to this investigation. The individuals who decide to accept to be interviewed on a subject possibly have a desire to help and perhaps please the researcher, and often consider the topic of the research to be important and worthy of study and to some extent have a belief about the subject that is somewhat similar to the researcher’s.

Another advantage of this method, in which the answers are written, compared to interviews or methods using speech instead of writing, is that it gives the respondent more time to think and formulate the answer. Some people may find it difficult to express their thoughts in words while talking, in particular in the words they would prefer to use if they had time to think and reflect on the subject. The method used in this investigation obviously allows the respondent the option to edit and erase the parts of the text he or she isn’t content with. This may at the same time be considered a disadvantage, since it is possible that a respondent in an interview tells something of value to the investigation that he or she would have deleted from a written answer.
One characteristic of the method used in this investigation that may be an advantage but also a limitation is that follow-up questions not are used. This limitation may have a value since the researcher has less influence on the respondents’ answers. In an interview there exists a risk that the researcher uses questions to more or less consciously direct what is said by the person being interviewed to get the expected or desired answers. For instance, if the researcher, every time the interviewee happens to mention something relating to what is wanted as an answer, asks the interviewee to speak more about this particular subject, it is likely that the researcher will get the answers he or she wants or expects, especially if the interview continues for an extended period of time and most aspects of the topic of the research have time to be mentioned.

Limitations and weaknesses of the method

One, perhaps obvious, limitation of the study is that it doesn’t provide any explanation of the real reason for information avoidance; it is limited to explaining the experiences and opinions of a not necessarily representative group of librarians working at universities in USA. A study of librarians’ or any other group’s experiences of and opinions about the reasons for information avoidance does not necessarily find out about the real reasons for information avoidance. The aim of the study is not to find out the reasons for information avoidance, but to investigate the perceptions, opinions and experiences of a group of librarians.

This survey does not provide any evidence of the nature of the general experiences of librarians working at universities in USA. The librarians’ answers to the questions sent to them may indicate certain tendencies but can’t be understood as any conclusive evidence of how all librarians working at universities in USA experience information avoidance.

It may be considered a limitation and weakness of this method that the librarians’ answers not are completely comparable. Some librarians give quite extensive answers while others answer with a couple of brief sentences. They also often write about information avoidance from different perspectives and in different contexts. Some write about their perceptions of information avoidance in relation to the library and their work while others write about information avoidance in society in general. There are also librarians who write about their own information avoidance while others write of the information avoidance of others, sometimes limited to the students at the university or to library users. These differences in answers may in part be due to the questions in the email that was sent to the librarians, which intentionally were formulated in a way not to direct the librarians’ answers.
The email sent to the librarians, to increase the probability that the librarians receiving it would read it, was quite brief and because of this there wasn’t much room for explanations or lengthy definitions of “information avoidance”. It also seemed improbable that the librarians would take time to answer many questions, and this limited the possibilities of the method. It is probable that many of the librarians who answered the email questions have more beliefs and experiences in relation to information avoidance than are expressed in their answers, but did not think about all of these when they answered. Possibly more questions about information avoidance would have resulted in answers describing more aspects of the phenomenon. On the other hand, such a survey would be directing the answers in a way that not was desired in this investigation, since the intention was to allow the librarians to express themselves without directing them.

The intention of the survey has not been to find out about the perceptions of information avoidance of every singular librarian that answered the questions, but rather to get the librarians’ collected perception of the phenomenon. The librarians’ experiences could generally be considered “inauthentic” rather than “authentic” using Heidegger’s meaning of these concepts (Moran 2000, p. 120, 226). Some librarians seem to reflect more on information avoidance than others though, and it appears to be a simplification to claim that they all always experience in similar ways, and they certainly often express different beliefs. In many cases their beliefs might be influenced by the “public knowledge” Heidegger writes about (Moran 2000, p. 120).

Interviews and direct observations of individuals obviously have the advantages that the researcher can see gestures and body language and hear the participant’s tone of voice.

Of course there exists the possibility in this method, as well as in interviews or any survey or investigation that consists of some form of communication, that the participants deliberately or not distort the truth, for instance by not answering as truthfully as they could.

Ethical considerations

Kafle claims that, as in other research, ethical issues are important in hermeneutic phenomenological research. The confidentiality of the participants should be protected; for instance shouldn’t the participants’ real names be used in the text explaining and presenting the investigation and research. The purpose of the research should also be explained to the participants, and they should also obtain access to the research findings (Kafle 2011, p. 197). In the research method used in this investigation, although not strictly what usually or traditionally is considered "hermeneutic phenomenological research”, the ethical guidelines mentioned by Kafle
has been used. The confidentiality and privacy of the participants have been respected, the real names of the librarians has not been used anywhere in the text, and information that could indicate their identity has not been disclosed. The librarians were informed of the purpose of the investigation in the email that contained the questions which were sent to them. In the same email the librarians were told that the final essay, presenting the research results, would be accessible in DiVA portal, a digital scientific archive used at several Swedish universities, and that the thesis also could be sent directly to them if they wished.

Reference system for the librarians’ emails

To be able to ensure that the librarians would not be recognized but at the same time indicate that a particular statement has been written by a particular librarian a reference system has been used, in which each librarian in the survey has been assigned a particular number. This demonstrates, for instance, that it is not the same two librarians who have written all the statements quoted in the survey, and also, obviously, when one particular librarian’s email is quoted several times in different parts of the essay.

Each librarian has been assigned a number ([1], [2], and so forth), and after a particular librarian is quoted in the text the number that has been assigned to that particular librarian has been placed. In ”References”, under ”Unpublished material”, it is possible to see which number is assigned to each particular librarian.

Data collection

The email sent to the librarians included a brief presentation and explication of the subject of the research, the purpose of the investigation, and two open questions. The questions read as follows: ”What do you believe are the reasons why people avoid information (at the library or in other situations or contexts)?” and ”What are your experiences of information avoidance?” In the email information avoidance is defined in the following way: ”Information avoidance refers to how people can avoid information in different situations (e.g., in everyday life, in society, at the library, or in other contexts).”

The librarians’ emails were found at the universities websites, and emails with the questions were then sent to the librarians.

Email replies answering the questions in the survey were received from the following universities: Syracuse University (New York), Brigham Young University (Utah), Washington University in St. Louis (Missouri), Stanford University (California), Rice University (Texas), Miami University in Oxford Ohio, University of
Idaho, Central Connecticut State University, University of Connecticut, University of Washington (Washington), University at Buffalo (New York), University of Oregon, Northeastern University (Massachusetts), Boston University (Massachusetts), Temple University (Pennsylvania), University of California-Davis, University of Illinois at Chicago, Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW), Florida State University, North Dakota State University, San Jose State University (California), Framingham State University (Massachusetts), Illinois State University, and The University of Texas at San Antonio.

As mentioned, some email responses were also received which not answered the questions in the survey. These email replies were sent from the following universities: University of Nebraska–Lincoln, University of Massachusetts Amherst, University of Hawaii, New York University, Kansas State University, The Catholic University of America–Washington, D.C., San Jose State University (California), and The University of Kansas.

During the course of the investigation several hundred emails have been sent. Emails have also been sent to librarians working at universities from which no replies were received. No replies were received from University of Arkansas, University of Richmond, Drexel University, Texas Christian University, Portland State University, and The University of Vermont.

The librarians in the survey are usually reference librarians and subject librarians. Email messages answering the questions in the survey have been received from, for instance, a business librarian, a social sciences librarian, a metadata and catalog librarian, a humanities librarian, a systems librarian, and a history librarian.

46 email replies were received. 35 librarians answered with email messages related to the subject of inquiry. One librarian answered twice, but the first answer is essentially a question and is very brief; the librarian claims that she is uncertain about what is meant by information avoidance and asks for further explications, and this answer has not been included in the investigation or been quoted. All the other librarians who replied with answers to the questions in the email survey replied with one email each. Hence, 35 email answers had a relation to the questions in the survey. 11 email replies did not include anything which could be considered answers to the research questions. These emails often consisted in some question about the meaning or definition of information avoidance. These questions were then answered to but only one reply to these answers was received (this reply was sent by the librarian who answered twice, who has been assigned number 8).

None of the librarians answering claimed to be absolutely negative to the investigation, although one of the librarians who didn’t write anything in connection to information avoidance stated that he was skeptical of the value of investigating the experiences of librarians. Another librarian wrote that she had nothing to contribute to the investigation, while another wrote that he had no time to answer.
Some of the librarians who answered to the email survey stated that they believed that the subject of the thesis, information avoidance, was interesting, and some of them had a quite positive attitude towards the investigation, such as for instance one librarian, who wishes me “good luck with this excellent thesis topic” and writes that he will be interested to hear about my findings” [1]. Another librarian writes, in relation to the subject of information avoidance and the research question, that “this is an interesting question and one that I have never really considered in this way” [27]. In general I have received positive reactions by the librarians while doing this investigation, although some of them have claimed that they were not familiar with the term ”information avoidance”.

Data analysis

In their application of Ricoeur’s theory of interpretation the researchers Tan, Wilson, and Olver use an analysis that they consider practically identical to thematic analysis in the first part of the investigation of their data (2009, p. 10-11). A thematic analysis has also been used in much of this investigation.

Braun and Clarke explain thematic analysis as a qualitative analytic method that searches for, identifies, and analyzes patterns or themes within a data set, which could be, for instance, a number of interviews or a collection of texts. Braun and Clarke further write that although thematic analysis frequently is used there is no consensus as to how a thematic analysis should be performed or implemented, and they claim that even though thematic analysis often is used in research it is not always identified as such, or even as a particular method. Thematic analysis is not connected to one particular theory but can be used within different theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 77-86).

Although Braun and Clarke give some guidelines or suggestions for how thematic analysis may be executed they state that these are not to be understood as rules and should be applied flexibly to suit the particular research. Braun and Clarke maintain that the researcher’s judgment is necessary to decide what is a theme and they advice against the application of rigid rules regarding these decisions. They state that a frequently recurring theme not necessarily is more essential or important than a less frequently recurring theme. The importance of a theme does not necessarily depend on its recurrence in the data set but on whether it contains something of importance in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 82-87).

The ”semantic” approach in thematic analysis implies that the themes are identified within the explicit meanings of the data. The analyst is initially focusing on what the participants have said or written. The analyst then organizes the data to show patterns in the semantic content, and then interprets the significance and
meanings of the patterns (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 84-85). This is the approach which generally has been used in the thematic analysis of the librarians’ email messages in this investigation.

The analysis of the data consists in moving back and forth between the whole data set, the extracts of data, and the analysis which is produced. Writing is also, according to Braun and Clarke, a part of the analysis, and should start from the beginning of the analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 86).

The first phase of the process of thematic analysis consists in familiarizing oneself with the data. This might be done by reading and re-reading the data. During this phase the analyst initiates the searching for and identifying of meanings and patterns. Braun and Clarke suggest that notes should be taken for “coding” of the data during this phase, and that coding should continue to be developed through the entire analysis. Codes identify features or characteristics of the data that the analyst considers to be of interests in the analysis. The codes differ from the themes, which often are broader, and which are based on further interpretation (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 87-88).

A subsequent phase in thematic analysis, according to the method suggested by Braun and Clarke, is the actual coding of features in the data across the entire data set, followed by the searching for themes, reviewing of themes, defining and naming of themes, and the producing of the report. In the report the reader should be convinced of the validity of the analysis. This could be done by the use of extracts from the data, displaying the pervasiveness of the themes (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 87-93).

The method which has been used in the thematic analysis of the librarians’ email messages has been quite similar to what is proposed or recommended by Braun and Clarke. Initially the librarians’ email messages have been read numerous times to attain familiarization with the data. The librarians’ email messages were copied into one document containing all of them, and this document was then read repeatedly. From the start of the analysis it was evident that some themes were recurring. Some of these recurring themes became evident even during the reading of some of the first emails which were received, but through the process of re-reading even more themes became apparent. The coding of the data was done manually by writing text within parenthesis after the coded part of a particular email in the document containing the librarians’ emails. In some cases codes were found searching for particular words, such as "time" or "information overload" after it became evident that these were recurring subjects and words in many librarians emails. It was obvious that certain words and expressions, such as "bombarded" with information [10, 18], and "overwhelmed" by information [10, 14, 17, 25, 33] were repeated in the librarians emails. But it was also necessary to read through and interpret the complete sentences of the librarians’ email messages to
be able to code them and, subsequently, assess which themes were present in their emails.

In the text which has been written in the essay in connection to the thematic analysis of the librarians’ emails several extracts and examples have been used which were taken from the librarians’ email messages, the intention being to illustrate the prevalence of the themes and to convince the reader of the validity of the analysis and the interpretations.

A thematic analysis, as the one used in this investigation, could often have a tendency to focus mainly or exclusively on what reappears, for instance what repeatedly is stated, and it could for this reason, perhaps mistakenly, be concluded that what reappears several times is what is most relevant or important. If something is mentioned only once it could easily be overlooked, while something that perhaps is considered evident, or part of a familiar discourse and for this reason is mentioned frequently, may be considered as the most important discovery revealed by the research. As has been mentioned, Heidegger claims that things are ”publicly interpreted” and expressed in ”idle talk” (Heidegger 1962, p. 253; Moran 2000, p. 120). A thematic analysis might possibly reveal more about what people tend to talk about and what already is considered to be known and familiar than the reality about the subject of the research, but since the intention of this study was to investigate beliefs and experiences it seemed relevant and appropriate to use a thematic analysis in the analysis of the survey.

As has been mentioned, Ricoeur claims that the interpreter attempts an initial understanding of the text’s meaning using a form of qualified guess, a ”naive interpretation”, and that a structural analysis could be used in the ”explanation” of the text. In the structural analysis the text is studied as a world of its own, which creates a distance from the interpreter’s prejudices and presumptions (Geanellos 2000, p. 114-115). The thematic analysis previously mentioned might be considered such a structural analysis, although it might be doubted that it could be completely performed without any previous assumptions or presuppositions.

Geanellos, writing about Ricoeur’s theories, asserts that the explanation of the text’s structure, for instance how the narrative is constructed and presented, could help in the interpretation of the text’s meaning, and that such explanations of narrative structure make the validation and falsification of different interpretations possible (2000, p. 114-115). It seems somewhat unconvincing that an explanation of a texts narrative structure could enable us to decide if an interpretation is valid or false. In this investigation and analysis a number of interpretations will be presented, but it is not stated with any certainty which of these, if any, is more true or false. The interpretations presented are more to be understood as possibilities than as firmly held beliefs. The researcher might have a belief or opinion about which interpretation might seem more likely to be more valid than another, but it is highly unlikely that there will be any consensus regarding these issues. It seems more
convincing that a structural analysis to some extent could distance us from our prejudices and presuppositions and for this reason White’s model for narrative structures is also used in some parts of the analysis of the librarians’ email messages.

White writes about how different historians can interpret the same historical event in different ways. According to White historians interpret, identify and construct a narrative about history as a certain kind of story. White, who uses concepts taken from Northrop Frye’s theories, states that there are four types or “kinds” of plot-structures for historical narratives: ”romance”, ”tragedy”, ”comedy”, and ”satire”. White exemplify with how different historians have written different ”kinds” of narratives, for instance about the French Revolution. The historian Burke describes the French Revolution as a ”tragedy”, a national disaster, while Michelet views is as a ”romantic”, and he describes the French Revolution (at least the years 1789-1790) as an ideal era, a period of fraternity and unity of people and God (1973, p. 290-298). White also explains how he defines ”comedy” and ”satire” but these ”plot-structures” will not be mentioned further in relation to this investigation.

White also asserts that historians explain history in four different ways, using an ”organicist”, ”mechanistic”, ”idiographic”, or ”contextualist” strategy. The ”organicist” explains history as parts in relation to a whole unit, and believes that each part should be similar to or anticipate the total structure. The ”mechanist” explains history as parts, events, organized in a chain of causes and effects. The ”idiographic” explains history as a process of discrete structures which could be called for instance ”movements”, ”trends”, ”eras”, or ”periods”, and believes that each such structure has its own characteristics. The ”contextualist” explains history finding a certain ”atmosphere” in common for a historical period (1973, p. 298-308).

The notions and terminology suggested by White in his analysis of historical narratives will be used to classify some narratives in the librarians’ email messages, or parts of these messages. There are obviously some major differences between the historical texts mentioned by White and the librarians email messages in this survey. For instance, the email messages are frequently not very long. In spite of this it is often possible to classify them as being written as ”romance”, ”tragedy”, or whatever, using White’s terms and the meaning he gives these notions. In fact, what often seems decisive of what is a ”romance”, ”tragedy”, and so forth, according to White’s examples, is the opinions expressed in the text as much, if not more, than the structure of the story (1973, p. 298-308).

The interpretations of the email messages in this investigation are usually described as possibilities rather than as what is believed or affirmed with certainty. Often many interpretations seem possible and reasonable. The interpretations mentioned in the essay are some of the ones considered to be quite probable or at least
possible. These interpretations are the ones that are “appropriated”, using Ricoeur’s terminology. As previously mentioned, appropriation, to Ricoeur, could mean to understand better or differently (2008, p. 114-115). Hopefully the new understanding is better or at least different than the initial understanding.

In order to interpret human behavior and understanding some parts of Heidegger’s theories has been used in the analysis of the investigation.

As has been mentioned Gadamer believes that dialogue could lead to a common understanding resulting in the appearance of something more and beyond the intentions of the speakers (Moran 2000, p. 249). In a sense the investigation might be considered to have a dialogical character since it is my interpretations of the librarians’ responses to my questions, a “dialogue” which has also lead to something more and different than what may have been suspected or intended, since the librarians often responded in ways that was not expected.

No particular rules have consciously been used to arrive at the interpretations in the investigation. During the course of the investigation some decisions have been made regarding what could be a more or less likely interpretation, though. For instance, when two views or beliefs are contradicting each other, I tend to believe that the view based on an experience or perception in reality is the more likely of these views. Also, I tend to believe, or suspect, that there might be some truth in what is affirmed by many of the librarians. This last belief or assumption might be a result of living in a culture where the majority often is considered to be right, or that the opinions of the majority should have priority. Obviously, the majority might be wrong, as Habermas rightly affirms in his criticism of Gadamer (Moran 2000, p. 284-286). But, as has been mentioned, in this case what is investigated is not primarily what is right or wrong but what are the librarians’ experiences and beliefs.
Investigation

In the following analysis the librarians’ email messages will be discussed and interpreted. The interpretations are in part influenced by previous research about information avoidance and, inevitably, also by my presuppositions and assumptions. In some cases the same email or statement is interpreted in several different ways and in these cases it is not declared which of these interpretations is the correct one, or if there exist one, correct interpretation. As has been mentioned, the interpretations are to be understood rather as possibilities or hypotheses than as affirmations of facts.

While writing about the librarians’ answers to the emails it will at times be stated that "many", "some", or "several" of the librarians in the survey answered in a certain way. This is obviously not to be understood as indicating what experiences of and beliefs about information avoidance are common among librarians working at universities in USA. I do believe, though, that it is quite likely that a similar survey investigating the experiences and beliefs of other librarians working at universities in USA regarding information avoidance would receive, although not identical, somewhat similar answers, and that the reasons why people avoid information which frequently are mentioned by the librarians in this survey also often would be cited by other librarians working at universities in USA if they were asked the same questions as the ones in this survey.

The reasons mentioned by the librarians for information avoidance are sometimes described as being connected or having a relation to each other or such a connection or relation might at times be inferred. There are not always clear separations in the text in the chapter about the investigation between the parts dealing with the different subjects, since these subjects or themes often are connected to each other.

Interpretation of the notion ”information avoidance”

Before answering the email the librarians interpret the text in it, including the term ”information avoidance”. They interpret, or seem to interpret, the notion ”information avoidance” quite differently, since the beliefs and views about information avoidance expressed by them in their email messages sometimes differ diametrically
from one another. For instance, while some librarians claim that they experience information avoidance all the time, others state that they don’t remember any such experience, and some even doubt that information avoidance exists.

The librarians’ differences in beliefs about information avoidance seem in part to depend on how they understand the notion “information avoidance” as well as the concept “information”. I might add that I don’t claim to know which is the “correct” interpretation and understanding of the notion “information avoidance”, and I have been quite brief and intentionally not very precise in the explanation of “information avoidance” in the email to the librarians, since the purpose of the investigation is to find out more about the librarians perceptions of this phenomenon and, to some extent, allow them to interpret the meaning of “information avoidance” for themselves. As mentioned previously, the following explanation of information avoidance was used in the email that was sent to the librarians: “Information avoidance refers to how people can avoid information in different situations (e.g., in everyday life, in society, at the library, or in other contexts).” In a sense it is here taken for granted that the librarians understand what it is to avoid information, and that they have some idea about what could be meant, for instance, by “information”. In spite of the brief explanation in the email some librarians claim that they have difficulties understanding what information avoidance could be. One librarian writes that she has “no idea what information avoidance is” since she has never heard of it and she claims that for this reason she doesn’t know what her views on it are [6]. Perhaps we can only understand what is spoken or written about, what is part of a discourse that we are familiar with. Heidegger claims that rather than seeing or perceiving something and then speaking about it, we tend to see what is talked about (Moran 2000, p. 234). As has been mentioned previously, Heidegger claims that instead of first perceiving things and phenomena and then interpreting them, we perceive of the things and phenomena as they already are interpreted and understood. Heidegger claims that our interpretations are based on a “fore-having” that we have before our interpretation, an assumption or presupposition about the things we are trying to interpret and understand (Moran 2000, p. 236, 277). When the librarians haven’t heard or read about the concept, in this case “information avoidance”, and have no clear preconception about what could be meant, he or she might have difficulties interpreting and understanding the concept.

Heidegger believes that the perception of a phenomenon isolated from previous interpretations or understandings is impossible (Moran 2000, 20-21). If we believe Heidegger is right in this assertion, the librarians perceive of information avoidance as this phenomenon already has been interpreted and understood, or not interpreted or understood, in our culture, rather than first perceiving the phenomenon information avoidance in itself. This may perhaps in part explain why many of the librarians in the email survey express doubt that information avoidance exists,
or claim that they haven’t thought much about this issue. When the librarians in the survey are familiar with a concept, on the other hand, as is the case with the concept “information overload”, for instance, they don’t seem to doubt the existence of the phenomenon. One librarian obviously has heard about ”cognitive dissonance” [11] since she uses this term, and she is capable of writing quite eloquently about this subject in relation to information avoidance. It is as if the term or concept ”information avoidance” needs to be familiar to the librarians to make them capable of expressing themselves about the subject. It is apparently often not enough to simply say that information avoidance is when an individual avoids information. It seems as if the idea of people avoiding information also needs to be part of a familiar discourse if the librarians, at least many of them, should be able to think about it and understand what that it could mean to avoid information.

One interpretation of some of the librarians difficulties to answer the email is that when they haven’t heard or read the words in a discourse familiar to them being ascribed to a particular phenomenon, they don’t know how to speak and think about it, they don’t know how to express themselves in a way they consider accurate, and they feel insecure, not only regarding what to write in relation to the issue, but also about the very existence of the phenomenon in question.

Information avoidance as a phenomenon would probably be more noticed by academic librarians and perhaps by people in general if it was more talked and written about.

The effect of the survey questions on the answers
The formulations of the questions in the survey obviously have an effect on how the librarians answer. This will also, to some degree, influence the structure of the narratives found in the librarians email messages.

The first question directed to the librarians, if White’s categorization is used, assumes a kind of ”mechanistic” view of reality, since it asks for the reasons for, the causes of, information avoidance (White 1973, p. 303-308). For this reason, possibly, many of the narratives that can be found in email messages correspond to a ”mechanistic” explanation. At the same time, perhaps in part because it is asked for ”reasons”, not, for instance, for one reason, or the main reason, the answers often tend to be a list of reasons. This may be interpreted as several parts of a whole entire unit, a basically ”organicist” explanation of the phenomenon (White 1973, p 301-307). Within the librarians answers several possible modes of explanation may be traced, but sometimes one mode is dominating.

It is also possible that certain ways of explanation, narration and understanding dominate the Western culture at this particular time in history, and the dominating view of reality of the culture the librarians live in may affect or to some degree direct or control the librarians’ answers. Perhaps phenomena, in present time in the Western world, tend to be explained as parts of a whole or as effects of causes.
The survey questions and the explanation in connection to them obviously might have several other effects on the librarians’ answers. A specific definition of how the concept information should be understood in this context would perhaps also have rendered other answers. But since one intention of the investigation was to let the librarians associate freely and also, to some extent, make their own interpretation of the concept "information avoidance", no very clear definition of the concepts were given.

Different librarians have also decided to write about information avoidance in relation to different contexts. Some have written exclusively in relation to the library and the university, while others have focused other situations and environments in which information avoidance occurs.

Is information avoidance always negative?

A reasonable interpretation of the librarians email messages in the survey is that most of them don’t think of information avoidance as a particularly positive behavior or phenomenon, which perhaps not is very surprising. Few librarians in the survey speak about a possible positive side to information avoidance. One exception is a librarian who mentions how information avoidance may curb information overload, [20] but generally the librarians in the survey tend to express a belief that information avoidance is a symptom rather than a cure of information overload. The tendency among some of the librarians in the survey to understand information avoidance as something necessarily negative may have something to do with the combination of the words "information" and "avoidance". Information, in our culture, perhaps in particular among librarians, might commonly be associated with something positive and valuable. One librarian writes, for instance, that she as a librarian generally believes that "information is power" [11]. It seems probable that the avoidance of something understood as positive could be perceived of as a negative behavior. Information avoidance is sometimes viewed as a necessary or inevitable behavior by the librarians in the survey, since it is impossible, for instance, to read all texts. But not even in this context is information avoidance generally perceived of as particularly positive; it is rather seen as an escape or evasion, as an incorrect, somewhat passive way of handling a situation. One librarian writes about that people, according to her, can be lacking a "filter" to be able to control information overload, but she doesn’t mention information avoidance as such a "filter" but rather expresses a belief that information avoidance could be the result of lacking the necessary filter [8]. Possibly the librarians prefer speaking and thinking in terms of filtering and selecting than in terms of avoidance. They might prefer to think that an individual selects some information, and inevitably, doesn’t select other information, rather than thinking that the individual "avoids" the information
that not is selected. In reality, though, "avoiding information" and "not selecting information" can often be the same action (or non-action) having the same motivations and causes. The word "avoid" and the notion "information avoidance" might of course be associated with a more active decision and conscious desire than the idea not to seek or select certain information.

One librarian claims that she almost always is glad to discover and know more information, but acknowledges that she sometimes is reluctant to absorb the information, because this makes her feel as if she is giving up "a sense of calm, and control" over her life [11]. Some degree of information avoidance might have a positive effect on the individual’s state of mind, if the information is perceived as an intrusion and causes unease and negative emotions.

Is information avoidance real and a problem?

The librarians’ email messages could be classified into two groups. In the first group of messages the opinion is expressed that information avoidance exists, and manifests itself in certain ways which often could be perceived. This group is the largest in this investigation. In this first group of email messages it is often implied that information avoidance could be a problem. In the second group of email messages opinions are expressed that information avoidance possibly does not exist and if it does it is not very common and is not a major problem.

As mentioned previously, when two conflicting opinions or views on reality are presented in this investigation and one view is based on having perceived a phenomenon while the other is based on not having perceived a phenomenon, it will be considered more likely that the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon have the accurate view. Some of the librarians who claim that people in general and also students avoid information state this with certainty, while the librarians who claim that they haven’t perceived information avoidance at all or among students don’t assert that people and students never avoid information, all they declare is that they don’t have any experiences of this behavior. This may in some cases possibly be caused by a limited capability to interpret how people and students think based on what they say and do, as well as on what they don’t say and don’t do. Information avoidance is usually not a visible, perceivable behavior, and it can usually only be suspected.

It seems unlikely that many of the librarians who claim that they don’t believe, or doubt, that information avoidance exists in fact mean that students, researchers, themselves, or any other people in fact, for instance, read all information about any subject in form of texts that is physically possible. Most individuals probably wouldn’t deny that they have noticed that people, including themselves, sometimes decide to do other things than informing themselves, in particular if the information
in question is related to research, education, or has some obvious practical use. But it is worth noting that several of the librarians in the survey doubt that information avoidance exists, or don’t experience it, at least not at the university or among the students, in particular since other librarians in the survey affirm that they do experience it, also among university students.

The possibility that people may avoid information seems to be alien to some of the librarians’ belief systems. One interpretation is that the basic belief of these librarians, judging from their answers, is that human beings, in particular the students at the university where they work, are information seekers and not avoiders of information. Such a view is consistent with Aristotle’s belief that all men desire to know, as well as with Kuhlthau’s theory that people feel uncomfortable being in a state of uncertainty and for this reason want to understand and receive information and knowledge about what they don’t know (Aristotle 2001, p. 1; Kuhlthau 1993, p. 343). On the other hand, according to several other theories, as has been mentioned in the chapter “Previous research”, people might also prefer to avoid information and remain uncertain.

Blunters tend to believe that a threatening situation not is as severe as it might seem (Muris et al. 1994, p. 18). Some of the librarians email messages could be understood or interpreted as if the librarians who wrote them don’t consider information avoidance, for instance at the university, to be a major problem, even though they sometimes perceive it or suspect that it occurs. One interpretation of these messages could be that these librarians are information avoiders or "blunters", at least regarding the subject of information avoidance at the universities where they work. Possibly these librarians consider the possibility that students might avoid information to be a threat, in particular if one of their basic perceptions of the world is that people and students are constant information seekers, or if they consider it to somehow be a threat to the librarian profession if people and students in fact often avoid information. Janis and Feshback claimed that if the responses to the threat not seems to be effective, the individual might prefer to ignore the threat and information relating to it (1953, p. 92). It might be difficult to know how to respond to information avoidance and avoidance of the library and it might be perceived as a convenient solution to ignore information about these issues.

Different librarians also have different personality traits and this might also affect how they perceive, for instance, a concept such as information avoidance, which, in some cases, might be somewhat unfamiliar to them, or contradicting their belief system. Rokeach claims that individuals with closed minds are more inclined to avoid information than individuals with open minds (Case et al. 2005, p. 355). A librarian with a "closed mind", who is a "blunter", might be less inclined to question previous beliefs and to accept new ones and might be less predisposed to start
believing something that to some degree might question his or her current belief system than a librarian with an "open mind”.

It may perhaps be assumed that information avoidance doesn’t exist, or that some people never avoid information. This possibility has also been considered but it has not been regarded as very probable. The quantity of all accessible information is so large that it seems impossible that any human being not, more or less actively, avoids most of it. Even if we understand information avoidance as a behavior based on a conscious desire to avoid information it seems likely that almost all people avoid information, for instance because of a lack of interest in its content. Sweeney and colleagues claim that everyone engages in information avoidance at some level since it is difficult to imagine an individual who never, for instance, has chosen not to read about some tragic news or avoided some health information (Sweeney et al. 2010, p. 347).

This investigation is based on certain assumptions, or perhaps "prejudices”, one of them being that certain inferences could be made based on our experiences. Our experiences from our lives demonstrate to us that no individual can or will pay attention to all potentially accessible information, including the information accessible at libraries. In this investigation it is assumed that all people avoid information. Most librarians in the survey also believe that information avoidance exists, but their experiences of it and beliefs regarding it differ.

"Inauthentic” understanding of information avoidance

Several librarians in the survey express themselves as not being excessively concerned about information avoidance and frequently claim that they don’t think much about the possibility that people and students might avoid information, not even information at the library. Not many of the librarians in the survey express a belief that information avoidance is a threat to the library and their profession. According to Heidegger we are usually somewhat careless and "inauthentic” in our thinking and talking for instance about death, both our own and others. We know that we probably might die someday but we don’t know when and we generally don’t worry ourselves or think very much about it (Heidegger 1962 p. 296-298). Although information avoidance might be considered a quite different and possibly less fear inspiring phenomenon than death it could be considered a major problem for librarians if the information at the library was avoided, or the library was avoided. Such information avoidance might lead to the "death” of the library. But many of the librarians in the survey have a somewhat careless attitude towards information avoidance, including information avoidance at the library. This attitude might, to use Heidegger’s concept, be considered ”inauthentic” (Moran 2000, p. 120, 239-240). One librarian expresses concerns about how students and people in
general prefer to search information using the Internet and Google for instance [15], but most librarians in the survey don’t express a belief that their profession is being threatened by information avoidance. Even though the librarians in the survey sometimes notice that the students avoid information this is not described as being a major concern to them. Possibly these somewhat unconcerned librarians feel convinced that the library always will remain unchanged at the university even though the students avoid information, or avoid the library. Another possibility is that the librarians believe that there perhaps exists a risk that the library will be used less, for instance because of information avoidance, and that this could be a problem for them personally, but that so far the library remains and they might feel that there is no immediate danger. Heidegger remarks that we don’t constantly think about death when it is not “present at hand” (1962, p. 296-298). One possibility is that many librarians don’t think much about what could be the negative consequences of information avoidance, since these consequences will occur in the future, and the librarians thoughts are occupied with their present everyday worries and problems. Heidegger claims that we all, not only librarians, live “fallen prey” to life, ”entangled” in life’s everydayness and daily preoccupations, worries, and concerns, and we are completely absorbed by completing everyday tasks (Heidegger 1996, p. xv; Moran 2000, p. 226-228, 242). These everyday preoccupations and concerns that possibly occupy the librarians thinking and ordinary talking might also, to some extent, explain why they don’t think more about information avoidance, as a phenomenon in reality or as a threat to themselves or their profession. One interesting finding in this survey is how little many of the librarians claim that they reflect on the possibility that people may avoid information, and how unaware many of the librarians seem to be of the possibility that many people, including researchers, students, and library patrons, might avoid information. It is also noteworthy how little experiences some librarians in the survey claim to have of information avoidance, in particular in relation to the students at the universities and the library. They seem often to be quite oblivious to how the students at the universities think. Some librarians perceive, while others suspect, that information avoidance behavior might exist, also among students, but many can’t remember any experience of it.

If it is assumed that information avoidance in fact exists, and even at times affects university students’ and librarians’ behavior in a negative way, it might be considered a problem that many librarians seem to be unaware of the phenomenon, or at least don’t think about it.
Interpretation of information avoidance behavior

The librarians in the survey might interpret other people’s, including students’ behavior differently. The same behavior might, for instance, be interpreted as information avoidance by one librarian but as something else, or not be noticed, by another. The librarians’ interpretation of the meaning of the behavior of the individuals in their surrounding influences their beliefs about the world they live in and all phenomena within it, such as for instance information avoidance. One librarian claims that the way different librarians respond to the questions in the survey might be influenced by “personal ethics, life outlook, morals, religion, politics etc” [22]. This is most likely the case. The librarians are also more or less conscious of, and willing to admit, their own information avoidance. One librarian mentions that information overload might cause people to avoid information, and adds that he believes that such information avoidance not is bad, and that it is the only type of information avoidance he himself is ready to admit but that he probably avoids information because of other reasons as well [20]. But most librarians in the survey don’t express themselves as being aware of or considering the possibility that they themselves might be avoiding information, for instance when it contradicts their beliefs and opinions.

In the survey the librarians are asked to interpret other human beings mental activities and a behavior that often is a lack of action, the decision to avoid information. This is obviously a quite difficult, challenging task, since the librarians generally can’t be absolutely certain about how other people, including students, think, and when, or if, they decide to avoid information.

Interpretation of limited experience

It is quite common, as has been mentioned, that the librarians in the survey can’t remember, or believe that they don’t have, personal experiences of information avoidance. One librarian writes, for instance: ”Although I have probably encountered information avoidance behavior, I can’t recall any striking specific examples” [17]. Another librarian writes that he supposes that it is possible that information avoidance could exist in the contexts of the university and library but he declares that he has no personal experience of it, and he can’t think of a situation where he, the students, other patrons, or any of his colleagues have avoided information in a research context [30].

When the librarians don’t have any experience, or can’t remember any experience of information avoidance, they seem to interpret this either as indicating that information avoidance doesn’t exist or at least is uncommon, or as something that might exist but that often is difficult to perceive for outside observers. In a sense, the librarians interpretation of information avoidance and their belief about the frequency of this behavior is in part depending on their tendency to base their beliefs
exclusively on what they see and hear or if they base their beliefs also on what they suspect, on what seems reasonable and likely, possibly also based on their own behavior and thinking. One librarian writes, for instance, that despite his lack of experience from his work, he believes that information avoidance is a frequent phenomenon [21].

According to the uncertainty management theory, as previously has been mentioned, people may deliberately increase their uncertainty when they are confronted by a threatening or undesired possibility (Bradac 2001, p. 463). Several librarians express uncertainty regarding to what extent the students or people in general avoid information. This is quite natural, since the librarians most of the times don’t know what students, and other people, really think. But the librarians who are uncertain about the students’ level of information avoidance usually don’t express themselves as being very curious or excessively interested in knowing if the students in fact are avoiding much useful information. Instead it is quite common that the librarians claim that they haven’t thought much about this issue. They usually don’t always express a strong wish not to remain in this state of uncertainty; they don’t seem to think it is a very serious problem to remain somewhat ignorant regarding to what degree students may avoid information. Possibly this interpretation is mistaken, perhaps the librarians in reality are anxious to know if, when, or how students avoid information, but nothing in the texts in their emails indicate that this is the case. We don’t know if some of the librarians try to increase their uncertainty about the existence of information avoidance. Some of them tend to focus their attention almost exclusively on the students’ information seeking. One librarian claims that he does see the students avoiding information but he states that he doesn’t see very much of this behavior; he has more experiences of students being interested in seeking information than the contrary [9]. This librarian doesn’t express doubts about the existence of information avoidance but rather seems to be uncertain about how common and how serious this problem is.

Monitors are able to recall events from their past experiences and remember situations similar to the one in question, while blunterers attempt to forget the situation (Muris et al. 1994, p. 18). Several librarians who are answering the email message claim that even though some of them state that they believe that information avoidance exists, they can’t remember any experience of perceiving information avoidance. This might of course be because information avoidance often not is noticeable to other people than to the individual avoiding the information. But it is worth noting that so many librarians don’t remember any experiences of information avoidance while others claim that they do have such experiences, even from the universities and libraries. The librarians could be divided into “monitors” and “blunterers” based on their attitude towards information avoidance. This division might be somewhat inappropriate and unjust in some cases, since the librarians have different roles at the libraries and, in their work, are more or less exposed to
information avoidance. But it is possible that the librarians have different personality traits which make them more or less capable of perceiving or interpreting the students’ and library patrons’ behavior. If they, even on a subconscious level, have a desire not to see a behavior such as information avoidance, that they find disconcerting or unwanted, they might not see it, or, if they see it, interpret it as something else, or forget it. If they can’t forget it or pretend it means something else they might convince themselves that the behavior, in this case information avoidance, is not a very serious or common problem. One librarian claims that he sees few library patrons who intentionally avoid information, although he acknowledges that he has witnessed the phenomenon. He asserts that most of the students and the faculty “are interested in finding as much information on their topic of interest as possible” [9]. He doesn’t write that this is what he believes or that this is his impression, instead he states that the students and the faculty in fact have this interest, as if he is certain about what are the students’ and the faculty’s interests. A reasonable interpretation of the statement seems to be that the librarian firmly believes, and is convinced, that the students and the faculty seek as much information as possible when they are investigating a subject. Another interpretation might be that the librarian, because of his feelings and emotions, because he esteems the university, the faculty and the students, is somewhat biased towards them and prefers to express purely positive statements about them and their behavior. Human beings, according to Heidegger, are controlled by their emotions rather than by logical reasoning (Moran 2000, p. 228). The librarian in this case reasons and interprets the students’ behavior, and recognizes that it occurs that they avoid information, but his interpretation of the reasons for the students’ information avoidance is rather benevolent, compassionate and somewhat uncritical. He acknowledges that he experiences the students’ information avoidance sometimes, but he prefers to interpret this behavior as being caused by time restraints or that the students not are aware of the types of information that is available rather than that the students are indolent or that they decide to spend their time on other activities that they consider more entertaining than information seeking. The librarian’s reasoning might be, or at least, could be interpreted as being influenced by his emotions.

Emotions can affect what an individual think and believe as well as say or write about other individuals. It might be suspected that some of the librarians who have answered the email to more or less degree are influenced by their emotions; they might for instance have difficulties being objective regarding the students, the library patrons, and the universities where they work.
Information avoidance narratives as "romance"

As mentioned, in several of the librarians’ email messages a belief is expressed that information avoidance, at least at the universities and libraries where the librarians work, isn’t perceivable or is a rather uncommon phenomenon that, if it in fact exists, not is considered a major problem. The students, researchers, and library patrons in these narratives are described as interested, curious, and energetic information seekers; they seem to be living in a more or less constant state of information seeking. Many of the narratives in these messages could be classified as "romance" according to White’s model for narrative modes (1973, p. 290-308). The narratives in the messages denying or minimizing the importance of information avoidance are characterized by much of what typifies "romance", for example "innocence", and these narratives also tend to present an "idyllic view".

Several of the email messages use this "romance" narrative mode, but one, which is quite representative, will be analyzed and commented in some detail. The librarian who has written the email claims that she can’t think of any examples of information avoidance from her career, and that she usually has been "involved in special subjects, in the sciences, where people are engaged, and are quite the opposite of information avoidant" [13]. One interpretation of this librarian’s email message is that she believes that engaged people, thoroughly fascinated by and involved in a research project, necessarily have to be the opposite of information avoiders. In the "ideal" world of research, described in the narrative mode of "romance", there is no information avoidance and exist no information avoiders. It may be argued that in the real world information avoidance can occur also within research. A research project might, for instance, with or without the researchers acknowledging it, adhere to one theoretical position or perspective and reject or avoid others. Heidegger, as has been mentioned, criticizes modern scientific research which uses what he considers predetermined approaches and perspectives (Day 2010, p 178). Gadamer believes that scientific understanding, as well as all other understanding, takes place in a context and has its origin in a point of view or perspective (Moran 2000, p. 251). If one scientific point of view is used and preferred other perspectives could perhaps, in a sense, be considered to be avoided. The avoidance of a scientific method might occur when it is considered obsolete or unfashionable for instance. Rokeach mentions that dogmatism could be found, not only in religious beliefs and political opinions, but also in science (1954, p. 194-199).

Most, if not all researchers are also forced to avoid some information, perhaps even relevant information, simply because of lack of time. Part of the research process might even consist in developing a strategy for what information should be selected and what should be avoided. The belief that information avoidance could be excluded from research, libraries, universities, or any part of human life might be considered a rather innocent and perhaps overly optimistic, if information
avoidance in this context is considered purely negative. The librarian who write in this "romantic" mode about her experiences of research expresses herself as being quite assured that the people involved in the research she mentions are the opposite of information avoiders, but it is not explained how she knows this or what has given her this impression. Our knowledge about how other people think, and other people’s information seeking as well as avoidance, tends to be rather limited. Several of the librarians seem to infer that since they don’t see the information avoidance and people don’t speak about it the phenomenon doesn’t exist or isn’t very common or important.

This librarian also speaks of individuals as being "information avoidant" [13]. One interpretation is that the librarian believes that individuals can be either information seekers or avoiders, similar to the previously mentioned concepts "monitors" and "blunters" (Miller 1987, p. 345). According to the librarian she has almost exclusively experiences of "monitors", at least in relation to her work. The division of people into either information seekers or information avoiders, into either monitors or bluters, is arguably too simplified and could distort our view of human behavior in relation to information.

Of course it is possible to interpret the email message, here considered to be narrated in the "romance" mode, in other ways. Perhaps the librarian only expresses that the people involved in the research projects she refers to, according to her, based on her impressions, are as dedicated information seekers as could be possible while doing research. Still, such an interpretation doesn’t seem to change the narrative mode of the email; it is still "romance". It is of course possible that students and researchers at many universities in USA are dedicated information seekers, but this doesn’t mean that information isn’t constantly avoided, for instance because of more or less conscious decisions to select particular scientific perspectives.

Imposed information avoidance

Some of the librarians write about information avoidance as something which could be imposed on people rather than as a behavior chosen by individuals. One librarian writes about how some nations avoid that certain information about past events are included in their history with the intention to create a national history that could be used "to inspire, intimidate, or control people’s attitudes about their nation or institutions" [34]. He writes about how the history of the war between USA and Mexico, which took place during the years 1846 to 1848, is taught differently in these two countries. He further describes an experience from his time as a high school student when he and the other students were told by their teacher that the purpose of their American history class was to educate them to become "patriotic Americans" rather than teaching them history, and the librarian considers
that the teacher, in order to do so, "had to cover up and distort American history in the process" [34]. In this case, the students don’t have a particular wish to avoid information and to avoid learning about the reality of the American history. The information avoidance is rather inflicted or imposed on them. Of course, it may be argued, that there are difficulties in projecting a "true" or not biased version of history and of the reality of past events in a history class. Some events must always, by necessity, be highlighted while other events will be ignored. It might, of course, be considered a problem if the intention not is to present a version of reality that is as close to the truth, and is as objective, as is possible. But some individuals, such as the high school teacher mentioned by the librarian, might believe, for instance, that the promoting of patriotism has higher value than telling the truth, whatever the "truth" might be considered to be. Possibly the high school teacher in this case doesn’t believe that there exist one truth or reality, but rather many versions of reality, and that reality is what is perceived and understood by the individual. For this reason he might choose to promote the version of reality that he deems most useful for society, for the country, and perhaps also for the students.

Another librarian mentions how many people in the state where she lives don’t want their children to be exposed to information that might cause them to doubt their religious belief [19]. In this case it is not so much the individuals themselves who want to avoid the information, rather they want to restrict or limit the information to their children. These individuals possibly don’t consider the information to be a transmitter of facts or knowledge; instead they might not consider it to be information at all but mistakes and lies or that the information might lead their children astray. Even though these parents might consider the information to be true it could possibly, according to them, have a negative effect on their children’s view of reality and on the beliefs that the parents consider to be of most importance. The parents’ behavior show some similarities to the high school teacher’s in the previously mentioned case, who valued the promotion of the students’ patriotism higher than the informing of the truth about American history and, according to the librarian, has to distort the truth to do so. The parents have the intention to educate the children as Christian believers, while the high school teacher intends to educate the students in a way that will make them patriots. The high school teacher, according to the librarian’s email, distorts the truth. The parents perhaps don’t intend to distort the truth, and if they do so depends on the interpreters own beliefs, but they try to promote certain beliefs and inhibit the exposure of information conflicting with the belief they consider to have the highest value.

One librarian claims that avoidance of information at the library is caused by the fact that, according to her, subject indexing is inadequate. She believes that, for instance "United States -- Civil War, 1861-1865 -- Periodicals" not is how people think [15]. This has, according to the librarian, resulted in people often preferring to search information using Google for example rather than seeking information at
the library [15]. This is more a change in selection of source of information than a complete avoidance of information, but often the information found on the Internet through Google might be different, briefer, and more superficial than some of the information found at the library. To improve the libraries service and contest the avoidance of the information available at the library the librarian suggests the development of ”a syndetic structure to capture all synonyms for whatever words a researcher uses” [15]. This librarian is one of the few in this survey who expresses some concern about information avoidance in relation to the library itself.

Accidental information gathering

One librarian mentions that ”accidental information gathering” when an individual encounters information by chance or accident in the environment, could possibly be related to a form of information avoidance [35]. He mentions that the way material is displayed in a library can have an effect on the library patron’s selection and avoidance of material. He exemplifies with how a person who, for instance, is doing research on Civil Rights might enter a library celebrating Martin Luther King’s birthday which is displaying material in relation to this theme. He writes that the immediate reaction of the person doing the research might be to focus on the display and select the material the library has decided to emphasize. This might, according to the librarian, be a perfectly valid information seeking and gathering strategy if the library has performed the task of displaying the material in an objective way, but argues that ”if the library has a bias either in terms of personnel or institutionally this may prove to be a bad strategy” [35].

Another problem with this form of almost accidental information seeking, which here is described by the librarian, is that the material could, without any individual intending to mislead or present biased information, end up answering other questions than those the information seeking individual really wants to find answers to. The information found, almost by chance, might relate to the subject of inquiry, but as a representation of the subject as a whole, it might be unbalanced. Possibly might material about Martin Luther King on display at the library be dealing with Martin Luther King as an individual and for this reason not be the most adequate or representative for a research project on the whole Civil Rights movement. This, of course, does not mean that the librarians organizing the display had to have any intentions to mislead in any way. This ”accidental information gathering” constantly occurs; we all do it and are subject to it, not only at the library but in all situations and contexts of our lives.
Information overload

Many of the librarians express a belief in their email messages that information overload, an excess of information that the librarians often describe with the word "overwhelming", is one reason for information avoidance. In fact, information overload is probably the reason for information avoidance that is most frequently mentioned by the librarians in the survey. The librarians’ belief that information overload could result in information avoidance are expressed for instance in the following statements in their email messages: “people may avoid information if its volume seems overwhelming” [17]; "people are often and easily overwhelmed by the amount of information available” [33]; "I think sometimes people avoid information to curb information overload” [20]; and "I think that people in general feel overwhelmed by so much information out there and they aren’t sure which information is true and which is not” [10].

The librarians in the survey often view information overload in relation to the capacity to respond to it. As mentioned, they generally don’t express the belief that information avoidance is the correct way to confront information overload, and they seem to imply that the learning of skills and information literacy are better ways to deal with the excessive amount of information we encounter in our lives. One librarian claims in her email, which has been mentioned in another context, that people might avoid information ”because they get a headache when trying to process the flood of information” [14]. She believes that information avoidance is caused by people not having ”an effective filter in place” which could help them to focus exclusively on relevant information that could benefit them. Instead, according to the librarian, ”they are overwhelmed by a mixture of both relevant and irrelevant information” [14].

Another librarian writes about a tendency to avoid what she considers a form of information overload or excess of information in our daily life in our environment. She writes about how we are ”tuning out” some information, such as ”advertisements on television or the internet, while texting or searching or reading something else” [10]. She claims that we also avoid information in a similar way in verbal conversations and in social media [10]. The librarian here mentions what is probably one of the most common forms of information avoidance. Much information is avoided because we direct our attention towards something else. At the same time we are probably not capable of avoiding the sometimes undesired information in our environment as much as we might wish or imagine that we do, since advertising, that we generally don’t have a particular intention to pay attention to, can have an effect on us.
Information avoidance in the "information age"

Several librarians in the survey express a belief that we, at the present time, live in a particular "age" or "era" or that the present period in history has a specific "atmosphere". The narratives which could be traced in these librarians' email messages could be considered to be using what White calls an "idiographic" ("era") or a "contextualist" ("atmosphere") explanation. The "idiographic" explains history as a process of discrete structures, each with its own characteristics, while the "contextualist" observes a particular "atmosphere" in common for the period (White 1973, p. 298-308). As I interpret most of the librarians' email messages they could be considered to be using a "contextualist" rather than an "idiographic" explanation when they are referring to the "information age". The librarians seem to believe that the information age is more than a discrete structure, trend, or movement. They rather perceived the information age as a period in time with a specific atmosphere, perhaps similar to how some historians have understood for instance the Renaissance as having a specific "atmosphere". According to many librarians in the survey we are living in a period in time in which the society is saturated by information, and according to these librarians people living at our present time are particularly overwhelmed by the amount of information that they encounter or have forced upon them in their lives. One librarian states that she believes that "in today's digital age, people are often and easily overwhelmed by the amount of information available", and this could result in information avoidance, described by the librarian as a form of "paralysis" [33]. Another librarian in fact doubts that information avoidance is possible because we, "these days" constantly are "bombarded" by information [18]. Most librarians in the survey don't elaborate this theme further; for instance they generally don't explain exactly which forms of information they believe that people are overwhelmed by, but one librarian writes that "[t]hese days" people are confronted "with an overwhelming amount of information coming from all sorts of sources, especially the Web but other media, as well" [7]. One interpretation of these "contextualist" explanations in the narratives in the librarians' email messages is that some of the librarians believe that we live in a period in time in which there is an excess of information, perhaps in an information age that has gone too far, overwhelming us with information. One librarian writes that when people who are living at our present time are confronted by so much information, they "may lack the skills, time or energy to navigate through to what is really important" and she believes that this may result in information avoidance [33].

Another librarian writes about how, according to him, some people who have no wish to change or learn more dislike and are tired of "the endless amount of information that changes the dynamics of our thinking, how we live, how we govern and raise our families," and he adds that these changes and this large amount of information are "overwhelming for most normal human beings" [25]. He claims
that many people, for these reasons, decide to ”avoid all unknowns at all cost” [25]. He further states that he himself and others ”of the technology generation are just tired of the abundance of information that is daunting just to get through a single day” [25].

Since many of the librarians in the survey express the belief that we live in a society where we are overwhelmed by information and that they believe that this excessive amount of information could lead to information avoidance there might be some truth to this. But ”information overload” and ”information age” might also be concepts that are frequently mentioned in media and in society and perhaps the librarians are used to talk about these concepts. As previously mentioned, according to Heidegger we tend to see what is said about a phenomenon (Moran 2000, p. 234). One explanation to why so many of the librarians notice and mention information overload as a cause of information avoidance could be that information overload is a theme that is talked about, it is part of a discourse that the librarians are familiar with.

Even though people might encounter much information in their lives in our present time there are also more ways to select the desired information than have existed during previous periods of history. In a sense, it has always existed more information than any singular individual could pay attention to, and since books and newspapers became common in society it has also existed more written information accessible than any individual could possibly read. Perhaps the information is more easily accessible now than during previous periods in time. There might also be more sources of information available now than ever before. People living today have to choose between numerous possible options when they try to inform themselves and it might be difficult to decide which information to select.

What is called information overload sometimes seems more properly to be described as an excess in communication, which of course always contains some form of information. It is generally not clear exactly which type of excess in information or communication the librarians in the survey believe are causing most problems.

The fact that so many of the librarians mention information overload as a reason for information avoidance is worth noticing and considering. The relation between information overload and information avoidance is a topic that requires further investigation, as well as which forms of information and communication the information overload consists of.

Lack of information literacy

Several of the librarians in the survey consider lack of some forms of information literacy to be the reason why people and students avoid much information. They often write about how people and students sometimes lack the necessary skills to
seek information. One librarian claims that information avoidance might be caused by what she refers to as "ignorance" when the students, for instance, are "either unaware or were never given lessons on use of databases" [31]. According to this librarian students are not always informed about or taught how to access the resources in an academic library or a database [31]. Another librarian claims that information avoidance might be caused by students not having learned research methods in school because it, according to her, isn’t taught there, and that the students also are unaware of their lack of knowledge about the proper use of a library at research level [15]. Somewhat similar views are expressed by another librarian in the survey, who claims that information avoidance might be caused by a lack of skills to find the information, in particular if, in order to obtain the information, it is required to use unfamiliar technology [28].

In general it might be inferred that several librarians in the survey believe that what might be considered the more negative forms of information avoidance, especially in relation to education, might be limited if people, and in particular students, where taught how to better seek and select information, and if their information literacy was improved.

Lack of time, lack of interest, or indolence

Many librarians in the survey believe that people, sometimes including themselves and the students, can avoid information because of a lack of time. The word "time" frequently reappears in the librarians email messages, in general in combination with some words expressing people’s lack of it. For instance, one librarian writes that the main reason for information avoidance that he has seen repeatedly in the library at the university is that the students don’t have enough time "to gather or digest" what might be the optimal information on a subject [14]. He claims that if, for example, a book with 200 pages is suggested as the best and most thorough treatment on a subject, the student might not consider having enough time to read all this text and decides to avoid the book. The librarian claims that "there are many variants on this, but they revolve around the central theme of not enough time" [14]. Another librarian, who writes that he has been working at the reference desk for over 17 years, experiences that "people are burned out with an overload of information" and "just want it short and sweet" as well as fast, because they claim that they don’t have time to wait [25]. This, according to the librarian, often occurs when he informs students that an item isn’t available at the library but that he can order it and it will arrive in two or three days. The students’ response to this is often that they don’t have time to wait [25]. Since we don’t know the students’ situation it is difficult to know if they in fact don’t have time to wait, it is possible, for instance, that the deadline for their research assignment is the next day and that
the item suggested for the research will arrive after that time. But it is also possible that the students don’t want to be bothered spending their time returning to the library for the item in question, and they might prefer to spend their time on other activities and entertainment rather than on research.

Obviously, since human life is restricted by time and because there is more information accessible just in form of written texts than any human being could possibly find time to read, a certain form of passive "information avoidance" will always be a part of human existence, if we by information avoidance mean a decision not to seek, read, or learn the content of some texts. But just because we can’t seek or learn the content of all texts doesn’t mean that we are trying to do so, or that we necessarily are trying to be as informed as possible. In fact, it is probably uncommon that an individual spends all the time that is physically possible even during a brief period to exclusively be seeking and learning the content of information. Even though it is probably true that there isn’t enough time in the life of one human being to seek and assimilate all information that exists even within a very limited subject, most people, including students, librarians, and researchers could probably spend even more of their time and make even more efforts to inform themselves further and better. But even if it is possible to always find more information within a subject it is questionable if it is advisable to constantly be insisting on informing oneself further. It seems often to rather be an issue of being able to decide what could be considered a reasonable amount of information seeking and learning about a subject. Information avoidance could sometimes be the result or an individual’s decision to stop seeking and absorbing information after having acquired what he or she considers to be "enough" or a sufficient amount of information within the subject under investigation. This form of information avoidance might be considered useful and necessary, and one of the tasks of librarians and educators might in fact be to teach people and students this form of information avoidance, in particular in the period of history we live in, in which, at least according to several of the librarians in this survey, information overload is a problem.

When we say that we don’t have time, for instance to seek information, in reality this often means that we have decided to spend our time on other activities. Lack of time might be a real issue, but other factors influencing information avoidance are our level of interest in the subject we are investigating, our diligence, and our desire to spend time on other activities than research.

Several librarians in the survey claim that they have experiences of people and students avoiding information because they prefer information that is easy to find and is quickly and easily understood. One librarian in the survey claims to have observed that people prefer easily accessible information sources to information sources that require more time and effort to understand and learn to use [17]. People, including students, according to some of the librarians, might avoid infor-
mation not only because the seeking of it and the learning to seek it requires efforts, but because the information itself, because of its nature, is challenging in some way and require some form of effort. Written texts could, according to one of the librarians in the survey, be avoided if they are difficult to understand because of the subject or language or if they are considered tedious or uninteresting, and because ”reading can be a time-consuming process” [21]. The decision to read only a part of a book or article may also be considered a form of information avoidance. One librarian tells about his own experiences conducting research where the researchers at a university were interviewed. The librarian writes that some interviewees in this study reported that they read fewer full articles now than in the past because abstracts are so easily accessible, and for this reason they now spend more time reading only abstracts and less time reading full articles than they used to [21]. According to another librarian people could also prefer to avoid information when ”they don’t want to expend the energy to pay attention” and may decide to avoid information that might bring bad news or be upsetting and ”require a lot of time and hassle to deal with” [11]. Obviously, such information might be present in many situations in life, not only or primarily in relation to education or research.

In fact much of the information avoidance which we attribute to lack of time might in reality be caused by indolence. If we analyze the lives of human beings in the Western world it is quite common to find people who spend time, in some cases a large amount of their time, on leisure activities. Much time is spent on what Heidegger characterizes as ”idle talk” (1996, p. 157), and in this communication Internet or modern technology is frequently used. Most individuals don’t spend all the time that would be possible seeking and absorbing information which might be considered ”useful” to them in the sense that it has a direct connection to their work, education or survival. Much of the information people decide to seek from various sources, such as the library, Internet, television, and in their communication with people, isn’t of the type that is of some directly perceivable practical use to them other than possibly being a form of distraction, entertainment, or amusement. Of course, also the information that the individual finds while engaged in some form of entertaining activity might prove to be useful in the individual’s practical life. But much information may arguably function as a distraction from other information which might be considered more useful or important.

One librarian writes that his ”time is not unlimited” and that he for this reason doesn’t make a great effort to find various comments and interpretations of the same news stories, since these interpretations interest him less than the story itself [2]. Of course it might be argued that it often might be difficult to separate form content in this way. The result of, for instance, only watching one news channel, only reading one newspaper, and so forth, is, obviously, that we will only get one perspective of reality and the world. It might also in some cases be difficult to
separate a story from its interpretation. As White mentions in relation to rather complex series of events, such as the French Revolution, different stories could be elaborated in various ways (1973, p. 294-295). There might be agreement as to which events occurred but not regarding what events caused other events, for instance. Frequently there is no consensus concerning the importance of occurrences, how they should be interpreted, or if they are to be considered to be part of a positive or negative development.

Another librarian writes that his experience is that people tend to avoid seeking more information when it is easier to make a guess based on what they already know or imagine that they know. He acknowledges that he himself often tends to act in this way [1]. According to Heidegger and Gadamer our interpretations are based on what we believe to start with, our presuppositions, or, to use Gadamer’s term, our ”prejudices” (Moran 2000, p. 237-238, 252). But the interpretation should ideally continue using what Heidegger refers to as the ”hermeneutic circle” (Moran 2000, p. 237-238, 269, 276-277). An interpretation, to Ricoeur, should result in the ”appropriation” of new understanding (Ricoeur 2008, p. 114-115). If we remain believing what we believed to start with we don’t change our understanding. The librarian believes that the behavior he writes about here often is due to ”a lack of diligence to look deeper into a problem, or think creatively” [1]. A similar lack of creative thinking is described by another librarian in relation to ”some seasoned scholars” who, according to him, avoid information owing to an attitude of indifference, and he claims that they ”just retread existing work or re-search” [14].

There seems to be two major reasons for information avoidance connected to being lazy and indolent. First, we might avoid information because we don’t want to make an effort to learn how to search for, and seek and understand information, in particular if we find the information tedious or difficult to understand. The second main reason why we might avoid information due to indolence is because we don’t want to make the effort to understand information that counters our current belief system. Of course, there might be other reasons than indolence which induce an individual to avoid information contradicting his or her beliefs, such as fear for instance, but possibly indolence in combination with fear might result in information avoidance. The librarians in the survey sometimes write about information avoidance being caused by a fear of unfamiliar information technology but also sometimes write of a reluctance to learn about this technology because it requires efforts.
Excessive quantity of options

Some librarians in the survey mention the difficulty or impossibility to evaluate all options when there is much information to choose from. In this context one librarian in the survey writes about the decisions we have to make for instance when we choose a particular flight or hotel when we travel, or when we choose some brand of electronic devices. The librarian writes that he has spent many hours of his life trying to make such decisions and reached the conclusion that the result of this kind of diligence isn’t worth the time spent searching for the best option [23]. Another librarian in the survey also states that he believes that there is a point when we have to stop seeking information but that this also means that there is a risk that we not will find all valuable information [1].

The information avoidance which often might be the result when an individual is being confronted by a large number of texts is also addressed by another librarian, who is writing about how he deals with all the different opera versions that is accessible to him. The librarian writes that he enjoys listening to opera, but he doesn’t attempt to listen to every recorded version of an opera which he has access to. Instead he chooses one version and continues listening to that version over and over again rather than trying to listen to another version [2]. This form of avoidance of ”information” or of cultural texts which could contain information, might be caused by a human tendency to, in some situations, remain with what we know and are familiar with. The librarian might of course also possibly find some new nuances in the same opera version if he listens to it several times. Sometimes we might also experience the same cultural text, such as a book, film or opera version, differently during different periods of our life. Heidegger claims that Dasein exists in and in relation to time and also exists in a cultural and historical context (Moran 2000, p. 222, 234-239). We change together with and in relation to the world which we live in, and this also affects how the same text during different periods might be experienced differently by us.

The reason for repeatedly consuming the same cultural text might also be a fear of being disappointed, for instance of wasting time listening to an inferior version of an opera. Of course, there is a possibility that there exist other, perhaps superior versions of the opera that the individual who only listens to one version never will listen to. Many people might have this tendency to continue with what they know and are familiar with, which can result in a form of information avoidance. If we enjoy a book we might spend our time reading it again instead of reading something new, and the same phenomenon might occur with many other forms of texts or cultural expressions. But obviously it also often exists a wish to experience something new, since there is an interest in new versions of operas, plays, and so forth, as well as an interest in completely new operas and plays, for instance. Possibly the personality traits of the individual and the situation in which he or she
is in influence the individual’s decision to select the familiar information or search for new information.

**Information avoidance narrated as ”tragedy”**

As has been mentioned, it might be inferred from some of the librarians email messages that a person might also avoid information because he or she is somewhat lazy, and one librarian even admits that this could be a reason for some of his own information avoidance [24]. Some of the librarians email messages indicate that some of them consider some people, and students, quite indolent. One librarian states that she believes ”that many people are inherently lazy and will avoid doing extra work whenever possible” [27]. She expresses the belief that these people limit themselves to doing ”the bare minimum of searching or information seeking” that they consider necessary. Examples of this indolence among people and students are, according to the librarian, the ”rise in plagiarism and hiring others to do research”. The librarian further claims that at the library they frequently see students who are satisfied with the first few articles returned in a search and ”indicate no interest in further searching” or doing a more thorough, profound research. She also affirms that they see students who decide to change their entire research topic immediately if they encounter the slightest difficulties or challenges in finding the data they need [27].

The narrative in this email message might be considered to be told in the mode of ”tragedy” if we apply White’s model (1973, p. 290-298). This email is only one example among several which narrate in the same ”tragedy” mode about people, and in particular students, who are completely disinterested in the subject of their research, who are lazy, who don’t want to learn how to search for information, don’t care about the quality of the information, dislike any kind of challenge, and want the information in as brief and easily understandable form as possible, even if that means it is superficial or of inferior value. The students in these ”tragedies” have as their main objective and priority to get the research assignment done as fast and with as little effort as possible, and if it was possible would prefer to pay someone else to do their information seeking and research. These students are also often distracted by some forms of entertainment, which they prefer to their education and their research. According to White historical narratives told in the ”tragedy” mode tend to use a ”mechanistic” explanation (1973, p. 303-307). This is not always obvious in the librarians’ emails, but in the email message mentioned above the librarian writes about an increase in plagiarism [27]. What is described as a ”tragic” situation is developing into something worse.

Since several librarians who experience information avoidance respond with email messages containing narratives narrated as ”tragedies” about the students’
behavior and attitude in relation to information, this merits attention. Exactly what should be done to improve the situation is a subject worthy of further investigation. Suggestions which might be inferred from the librarians’ email messages is that it might be preferable if the students, to some extent, would select research subjects of their own interest and were given more time to complete their assignments.

**Demographic factors**

Demographic factors, such as social and economic class, ethnicity, level of education, and so forth, might also influence information avoidance according to some of the librarians. Jung, Ramanadhan, and Viswanath suggest in their study that the tendency to seek or avoid information about cancer might be influenced by social factors (2013, p. 105). Johnson, Andrews, and Allard also claim that demographic factors, such as an individual’s economical status, might affect an individual’s information seeking as well as avoidance (2001, p. 339-341).

Some librarians in the survey suggest that information avoidance could be caused by socioeconomic factors. They tend to mention such reasons in relation to people in general but not explicitly in relation to the students and themselves. One, perhaps reasonable interpretation in this case could be that they include themselves and the students when they write about people in general, while another interpretation is that they believe that such factors affect other people’s information avoidance.

One librarian mentions that she believes that one of the reasons for information avoidance is that some students can’t afford the access to certain information [3]. But most librarians don’t mention this reason, and don’t mention demographic factors, such as class, ethnicity, etc, as the major causes of information avoidance. This does not necessarily mean that they don’t think that these factors have an influence on information avoidance. Instead they perhaps think that these reasons are evident or generally not tend to be discussed in this context.

The information avoidance that is a result of differences in economic status, which some librarians in the survey mention briefly, might lead to an increased division of society into a higher class with access to higher quality information and knowledge and a lower class without this access. Because of the existence of libraries and the Internet much information is free or the access to it can often be relatively inexpensive. Of course, the part of the world’s population that can’t afford computers or other technical devices necessary for Internet access, or can’t afford to access Internet in some other way, or have no access to a library, are unable to access much information that is available to others.

A system where individuals have to pay for their education obviously also excludes those who can’t afford to pay for their education. The system could also be
constructed in such a way that inferior universities or other institutions for education are less expensive and higher quality institutions for education are more expensive. The people who can’t afford to pay the tuition for the universities might be considered forced to "avoid" the universities and the information that could be received while studying there. This, in a sense, is a form of information avoidance caused by lack financial resources, but, this reason is hardly mentioned by the librarians in the survey. Perhaps it is not considered "avoidance" since it is not based on the individual’s desire.

As has been mentioned, Gadamer believes that our understanding is based on our "prejudices" (Moran 2000, p. 252). Beliefs, opinions, and understanding regarding all issues, including the relation between demographic factors and information avoidance are likely to depend on such "prejudices" or presuppositions. Heidegger comprehends individuality and individuals as culturally, socially, and historically constructed by traditions, customs, and language, (Day 2010, p. 177). If this is the case our individual beliefs, opinions and values are also affected or constructed by our cultural context.

Emotions causing information avoidance

Some librarians in the survey affirm that they believe that emotions can cause and influence information avoidance. As has been mentioned, one librarian claims that she sometimes feels a reluctance to absorb information, since she feels as if she is giving up "a sense of calm, and control over [her] life" [11]. This reluctance to accept and learn the content of new information might be due to a desire we might sometimes have to leave our belief systems intact. Ricoeur explains understanding of new knowledge as "appropriation", as making our "own" what initially was alien (2008, p. 114-115). The librarian in this case claims that she sometimes feels as if information could be an "unwelcome intrusion" [11]. Perhaps we don’t always want to change. According to Rokeach people with what he calls a "dogmatic" belief system are not prepared to change the beliefs held and accepted by the authority of that belief system (1954, p. 194-199). But possibly also people who don’t have what could be classified as a dogmatic beliefs system are at times reluctant to accept information which will force them to revise their present views and opinions. This might be because we, possibly, often are somewhat emotionally attached to our opinions and beliefs. In language concepts in relation to our opinions and our beliefs are often used to explain who we are rather than what we believe. For instance, an individual might be called a "Christian" or a "Republican" rather than referred to as "believing in the Christian faith" or "agreeing with the politics of the Republican Party". This use of language might possibly lead to a simplification in our thinking about human beings and their beliefs and opinions. If we be-
lieve that we "are" our opinions and beliefs, and we understand ourselves as belonging to a group having certain beliefs and opinions, we might possibly adhere to all the beliefs and opinions expressed by this group without considering or reflecting on the meaning of these particular beliefs and opinions.

It might often be considered valuable to receive some information and have some basic knowledge about the world, even information that isn’t absolutely necessary for our survival, but if this information causes us distress, anxiety, fear, or other disagreeable emotions, and we have no possibility or intention to do anything to change the outcome of the situations of which we are informed, it might be considered better for us to remain ignorant and avoid the information that is causing us distress. One librarian writes that she has a friend with a psychiatric disorder who finds televised news about events in the world extremely distressing, and the librarian claims that even though she acknowledges that this is an extreme case she claims that most people function in a somewhat similar way [11]. Heidegger, on the other hand, as previously has been mentioned, claims that events that don’t have a direct influence on our own existence, such as events occurring to unknown people, are experienced "inauthentically" because, according to Heidegger, our own self or being not is profoundly affected by them and we don’t experience these events as if we ourselves were personally involved in them (Moran 2000, p. 120, 239-240). The librarian previously mentioned writes that her friend with the psychiatric disorder imagines that the news has a direct connection to her personally, and that messages are sent to her through the information in the news. In a sense, she seems to experience the events reported and presented in the televised news in a more "authentic" way than most people do. But even though our own being might not be profoundly affected by being informed of tragic incidents occurring to unknown people we might be more or less affected, depending on our personality, our capacity for empathy, and our imagination. Heidegger’s theory is that people experience either "inauthentically” or "authentically” (Moran 2000, p. 237-240). This might be considered a simplification. In fact, it may be argued that some human beings feel more emotionally engaged than others, while some are more indifferent and emotionally distanced from the situations and people they are informed about. Heidegger, on the other hand, claims that most of the times we are equally indifferent to most people, for instance in relation to their death. Heidegger claims that in our everyday manner death is understood as a "mishap” that constantly occurs, he mentions the death of a neighbor and a stranger as if these events are experienced in a similar way by us, and he claims that we often consider the death of "Others” as a "social inconvenience” or "downright tactlessness” (1962 p. 296-298). Different people tend to be more or less indifferent about other people though; perhaps they could be considered more or less "authentic”. But Heidegger doesn’t mention any middle stance; he believes we are experiencing "authentically” or "inauthentically” (Moran 2000, p. 237-240).
The media by which the information is presented might also affect our experience of it. Information communicated using filmed presentations of tragic events could, arguably, sometimes have a strong impact on us, and could, perhaps, be considered to have the possibility to be experienced "authentically" or at least not absolutely "inauthentically" by some individuals. Information could also be communicated using photography, which also could have an emotional impact on us. "Inauthentic" understanding of news might occur, as has been mentioned, for instance, when we hear or read about a number of unknown people who have died in some tragic event (Moran 2000, p. 120). This form of reporting is of course very common in media using written texts, as well as in radio and television when the event is spoken about rather than shown. It seems likely that brief reports about an event might often be understood less "authentically" than more elaborate reporting explaining more details. One librarian mentions that he mainly is interested in the news story in itself rather than in the interpretations of it [2]. The reporting of an event without much interpretation of it might often become quite brief and the event might not really be understood other than in an abstract form, "inauthentically".

Another librarian claims that the reason why people avoid information is that "they don't want to be reminded of negative situations or emotions", and she refers to "the old saying - Ignorance is bliss" [19]. In a sense, the people who don't want to be reminded of negative emotions aren't completely ignorant of them, but might prefer not thinking about them and avoid information associated with these unpleasant subjects. This might, arguably, be one area where information avoidance could be considered positive. On the other hand, within psychology or psychoanalysis it is sometimes regarded as helpful and necessary to remember repressed memories and acknowledge even negative emotions.

Fear
The librarians in the survey, perhaps not surprisingly, don’t write much about students fearing the content of the information at the libraries at the universities, but some mention that people might avoid information because of fear. One librarian mentions that people might avoid information because they fear it might bring bad, upsetting news [28], while another librarian claims that people may avoid information about phenomena that they fear "e.g., the potential deleterious impacts of carcinogenic agents or climate change" [17]. According to several librarians in the survey climate change is a subject that people often decide to avoid to inform themselves further about. The reasons for this might be that they believe that there isn’t much they personally could do to change the situation. This is similar to how people who believe an illness is incurable decide to avoid information in relation to it (Cutler & Hodgson 2003, p. 9, 16; Miles et al. 2008, p. 1872). Also, climate change is not necessarily a major problem in the present life of most people; in-
stead it will be have more effects of our lives in the future. As has been mentioned, Heidegger believes that we live "fallen prey" to life, and live occupied by our present concerns and worries (Heidegger 1996, p. xv; Moran 2000, p. 226-228, 242). Heidegger also writes about how we, according to him, most of the time, don’t worry ourselves about death since we are not dying at the present moment; we feel as if right now death "has nothing to do with us" (1962, p. 297). Since most of us aren’t deeply affected by climate change at this present moment in time, we might think of this danger as if it doesn’t concern us, or at least, it doesn’t concern our present being. This might also be a reason for not being interested in information about climate change. We might limit ourselves to seeking information relating to our present concerns and worries and avoid information about what will occur in the future.

 Fear of information technology

People might fear or be apprehensive about the information related to the technology which is necessary or useful in some information seeking or retrieval. For instance, one librarian in the survey writes that people might avoid information if the retrieval of it "requires using technology with which they are unfamiliar or fearful of using" [28] while another librarian claims that she suspects "that people avoid information which makes them uncomfortable or fearful" [17]. Other librarians write that people "are intimidated by the technology that aids in finding [information]” [26] and that people "don't know information retrieval systems well and they are afraid of the unknown” [21]. It seems probable that demographic factors often could be related to the fear of the use of technology to search for information. These fears are possibly more prominent outside of the university. The librarians in the survey generally don’t write specifically about students in relation to these fears but instead about "people" sometimes fearing this information technology.

 Information related to health issues

Relatively few librarians in the survey mention lack of desire to learn about health related issues as a reason for information avoidance. The librarians who do mention health issues write about that people sometimes have a desire to avoid information about such topics more because of a wish not to diminish the pleasure they feel continuing an unhealthy behavior rather than because they are experiencing an extreme fear of being or becoming seriously ill. One librarian writes that she believes that people sometimes "avoid information that might inhibit their enjoyment of experiences that they find pleasurable” [17]. She writes that she imagines that some people, for instance, don’t want to hear that some particular food is unhealthy [17]. This librarian expresses a belief that people’s capability to feel pleasure is diminished if they are informed that the behavior resulting in their pleasure is,
for instance, unhealthy or has some other quality which might be considered negative. In many cases, though, people might already be informed and be aware of the detrimental effects of their activities and behaviors, but are unable to, or don’t want to, discontinue the harmful behavior. In such a case they may not want information, not so much because they don’t want to be informed since they already are informed, but rather don’t want to receive more information to be reminded of undesired facts. They might also suspect that there is new information in relation to their behavior that they are unaware of but decide to avoid it because they expect that this information will even further indicate or prove the detrimental or dangerous results of their behavior. Heidegger, as has been mentioned, writes about what he considers the “inauthentic” attitude that he believes characterizes most of our existence, including, most of the times, our attitude towards death. As mentioned, Heidegger believes that we generally don’t worry ourselves extensively about our own death when it is not "present at hand”, when we believe it will occur in the future at some unknown time (1962, p. 296-298). The people in the previously mentioned case who prefer to avoid information which informs them of the harmful effects of their behavior possibly have an ”inauthentic” attitude towards death. Because their behavior, such as their eating habits for instance, doesn’t seem to lead to their death at the present moment they don’t worry themselves excessively about changing their behavior.

According to uncertainty management theory, as previously has been mentioned, people may deliberately at times increase their uncertainty (Bradac 2001, p. 463). One librarian mentions that she might avoid some information about a ”certain health care treatment or herb supplement” that she favors if this information is inconclusive or might be erroneous [14]. In this case the librarian prefers to not increase her uncertainty about the treatment or product she favors, but possibly she might be considered to be accepting information which increases the uncertainty of the information questioning the value of the treatment and herb supplement. The librarian writes that she ”favors” the health care treatment and herb supplement, rather than that she firmly believes in their effectiveness, which she of course also might do. Possibly we are often somewhat emotionally attached to what we favor. According to Heidegger human understanding is influenced and controlled by emotions rather than by logic (Moran 2000, p. 228). In some cases our decisions regarding which information we should accept or avoid might depend on emotions rather than on logical thinking. We might favor or esteem something without necessarily being aware of why we feel this way and base some of our information seeking and avoidance on these emotions. If we find information which contradicts the value of a health treatment that we are in favor of, for instance, we might seek information that counters, or questions, the information contradicting the treatment we favor. In this way we might increase our uncertainty about the validity of the information we disagree with to begin with.
Fear of the reference situation

When the librarians in the survey mention fear as a reason to avoid information at the library they generally don’t refer to avoidance caused by fear of the content of the information, but instead to a "fear" of the reference situation and of the library staff. Some librarians mention that students and library patrons avoid information because they are afraid of being embarrassed if they would approach and ask the librarians questions, and for this reason remain ignorant about information and about ways to obtain information. One librarian mentions “trepidation” as a reason for information avoidance, referring to some students who, because of shyness and lack of self confidence, avoid approaching the librarians and other people working at the library to ask simple questions or to find out how to use database resources properly [31].

The fear of embarrassment in relation to the reference situation at the library is explained by one librarian as sometimes being caused by the library patrons not having a clear idea about what they are seeking. The library patron in such a case might, according to the librarian, fear that after having asked the librarian a question being asked more questions by the librarian to specify the subject of inquiry further. This, claims the librarian, might cause the library patrons embarrassment if they haven’t studied the area of the investigated subject sufficiently to clearly be aware of what they are seeking [10]. Another librarian in the survey expresses similar views; she claims that people might prefer not to ask for help with their information seeking if the information has a content which they are unable to comprehend. The librarian claims that in such a case some people prefer to avoid the information because they don’t want to risk giving an impression that they aren’t intelligent or risk being embarrassed [28].

It might seem somewhat absurd that students or library patrons should fear the reference situation or feel apprehensive about approaching the librarians to ask them questions. On the other hand there might be reasons for this apprehension. One librarian mentions that information avoidance might be caused by an individual’s "prior negative experience with a library or person or agency” that could function as a provider of information [28]. If it is common that people have negative experiences of the behavior of library staff it is perhaps understandable that they are hesitant to approach the staff with questions or asking its members for help. The possibility that the librarians’ own behavior might sometimes result in people and students avoiding information is not mentioned very frequently by the librarians in this survey, though. Investigations of library patrons’ and students’ experiences and perceptions of the library and the reasons why they avoid approaching library staff to ask questions relating to information seeking might clarify the reasons behind their fear of the reference situation and hesitation to approach librarians.
Avoidance of information contradicting beliefs

Many librarians in the survey also believe that people avoid information that is contrary to their beliefs and opinions. One of the librarians who express this view writes that he believes that some individuals "are very dichotomous and accept information that supports their belief while avoiding that which doesn’t" [33]. Another librarian in fact believes that the most common reason for people’s information avoidance is that the information is "contradictory or challenging to their point of view” [20]. The librarian further writes that it is easiest for an individual to exclusively accept the information which "affirms” the individual’s "place in the world” and avoid all other information [20].

The librarians in the survey, with a few exceptions, don’t specifically state that they themselves and the students avoid information contradicting their beliefs or opinions, but, obviously, it doesn’t mean that they aren’t included when they write about "people” avoiding such information. One librarian in fact mentions that he himself avoids a particular TV-channel, because, according to him, it is "so brazenly biased and dishonest” [30]. The librarian in this case expresses the view that the TV-channel in question is dishonest in their reporting of the information, and this might be the reason why he avoids it, but it is also quite obvious that the opinions expressed by the TV-channel not are in agreement with the librarian’s in this case. People might also, according to another librarian, avoid information at the library, as well as in other contexts, because of a reluctance to "engage with contrary viewpoints” [14].

According to Rokeach is dogmatism, as has been mentioned, a system of beliefs based on the beliefs held by an authority (Rokeach 1954, p. 194-195). One librarian in the survey claims that people might avoid information that contradicts the beliefs of some authority figure in their lives [8]. This is in concord with Rokeach’s theory of "dogmatism” controlling some people’s belief systems (Rokeach 1954, p. 194-195). The librarian in this case claims that the reason for avoiding the information which the authority figure disagrees with might be to avoid an argument [8]. Rokeach rather explains dogmatism as beliefs firmly held, not only by the authority, or authority figure, but also by the individual with the dogmatic belief system (1954, p. 194-199). The individual with the dogmatic belief system would never accept the information contradicting the authority’s beliefs and subsequently possibly have an argument with the authority figure, but would instead avoid the information because it contradicted the dogmatic belief system. The librarian also claims that she believes that people might prefer to avoid information to not have to "reconsider an assumption from the past which may have been held by them for many years” [8]. One interpretation of this might be that people don’t want to know that they have been wrong. Perhaps because of a sense of pride, they don’t want to receive information proving to them that they were mistaken.
As previously has been mentioned, one librarian in the survey states that she has observed people actively avoiding information primarily when it counters their religious belief. The librarian suspects that the fact that she mainly has seen information being avoided for this reason might be that she lives in what she claims is "an extremely conservative area of the United States" [19]. As mentioned, some of the religious people in this area, according to the librarian, also, or above all, want their children to avoid some undesired information. For this reason, writes the librarian, the parents often want their children to avoid certain information sources, as well as situations, where there is a risk that they will hear, see, or read something that will cause them to doubt their religious faith. The librarian writes that this desire to avoid information is most evident in relation "to sex education, evolution and global warming (and other science topics), and politics" [19]. Other librarians in the survey also mention a desire among some people to avoid information about evolution and global warming, as well as political views contradicting their own. According to one librarian in the survey he often encounters "people of various political persuasions who will only listen to either a liberal or conservative news source and not listen to the other" [30]. Another librarian in the survey writes that she believes that most people probably value information and knowledge in theory, but often avoid it in reality, and she believes that this might be due to the fact that some people might have "deeply entrenched opinions, such as those on religion or politics, and may avoid contrary information" [24].

In USA there has been, claims a librarian in her email, a "polarization of political viewpoints" which according to her has been a continuing process during the last 20 years [27]. She states that she believes that "more and more people are remaining in their ‘comfort zones’ and relying on niche sources of information" [27]. She mentions that mass media and social media, according to her, often are communicated through such information sources, which the librarian believes reinforces the beliefs and opinions that people already have [27]. The librarian seems to be suggesting that the polarization of opinions and beliefs is becoming even more pronounced by people’s increased tendency to avoid exposure to information in which their own beliefs and opinions are questioned or contradicted. As a narrative, if White’s model for narrative modes and structures is applied, this might be considered a "tragedy", as well as a "mechanistic" explanation (1973, p. 290-308); more people are accepting even less exposure to information conflicting with their beliefs and opinions and instead they only accept information which reinforces their current opinions and beliefs. The librarian’s email may be interpreted as a description of a deteriorating, degenerating process, with less real communication, less desire to understand anything new, and more and more isolation and polarization.
The Internet Filter Bubble

Several librarians mention the effect of customized results and customized news in relation to information avoidance. One librarian writes about "the so called bubble effect where we tend to choose information that confirms our own biases" and he claims that this could occur at libraries but affirms that this phenomenon is more prominent in the "Google world of customized results" [35]. There is of course a difference between the information avoidance that is caused by our biases, opinions and previous view of the world at the library, for instance, and when we receive customized results while searching for information on the Internet. When we receive the customized information while searching in Google, for instance, this is not directly based on our thinking or our previous or present beliefs, but instead, for example, on our previous searches. The form of information avoidance that could be considered to be the result of customized search results might not always be particularly desired by the individual, and, arguably, customized search results and customized news might narrow and limit our view and understanding of the world. The "Internet filter bubble" might often be considered imposed on the individual, resulting in a form of information avoidance that the individual might not be completely aware of. The customized information might also have the effect that our knowledge becomes more specialized on particular subjects, while we might learn less about topics we not are familiar with to begin with.

Degrees of information avoidance

The librarians’ interpretations of information avoidance depend in part on how strong they believe the desire to avoid information has to be to qualify as information avoidance. Their understanding of what information avoidance is obviously affects their beliefs about when they are experiencing this phenomenon. If a librarian, for instance, believes that a strongly felt wish to avoid information is implied if the term “information avoidance” should be applied, this behavior or phenomenon might not be considered very common by this librarian, at least not at libraries at universities. If, on the other hand, information avoidance isn’t considered to exclusively imply a strongly experienced desire but also includes more subtle desires, for instance the desire not to seek and learn the content of irrelevant and tedious information, all human beings could probably be considered to constantly be avoiding information. This last mentioned belief about what information avoidance means is also expressed by many of the librarians. It is not the purpose of this essay to determine which is the correct belief regarding information avoidance, or if there is such a correct opinion or belief. But the essay concerns information avoidance in general, not exclusively information avoidance caused by strongly experienced emotions.

68
The desire to avoid information could be more or less strongly felt. An example of a strong desire to avoid information would be when an individual fears the possible content of the information and absolutely not wants to be informed and prefers to remain ignorant. More commonly information avoidance is caused by rather weak desires, as for instance when a person decides to not seek or read some information because of lack of interest. An individual might even be interested in and seeking the information that’s later is avoided. For instance, an individual might search for an article and obtain access to it, and then finally only read parts of it, not because of a real desire to do so but because the individual decides to spend his or her time doing something else than reading all the information in the article. One librarian writes about his experiences from his own research where researchers at a university claim that they often read only the abstracts of the articles [21]. This is not because they particularly wish to do so; rather, according to the researchers, it is the result of a combination of information overload and lack of time [21].

Scale for level of desire to seek or avoid information

It seems to be a simplification to claim that people either want to seek or want to avoid information. Rather, they tend to have a stronger or weaker desire so seek or avoid information depending, for instance, on the information in question and on the context. In some situations it might be useful to evaluate some individuals’ level of desire to seek or avoid information. For instance, in schools, colleges, and universities it might be of interest to know the level of interest among the students to seek or avoid certain information. Perhaps most students are not decidedly against seeking and learning the content of some information and wouldn’t say that they have a strong desire to avoid it. On the other hand, if they are occupied with some activity that they consider more important or entertaining than seeking and obtaining the information they might decide to avoid it, or, if this expression is preferred, they might decide not to seek it. One librarian claims that students seek the information that is necessary for them to do the assignments and tasks required of them in order to get their grades, but when a grade is not an incitement the students will avoid information relating to their education [29]. The effect of this attitude among the students could be that the more certain the student is of having enough knowledge to receive the grade he or she aspires, the less motivated the student will be to seek further information related to the research subject.

A "scale" could be used to assess people’s level of desire or wish to seek as well as avoid information. For instance, on a scale between -5 and +5 the highest degree of desire to avoid information would be assigned "-5", while complete indifference regarding the desire to seek or avoid the information would be considered "0", and the strongest wish to seek information would be assigned a "5". Such a scale could be used in research in forms that could be filled out by individu-
als in various contexts to assess their level of desire to seek or avoid information in certain situations about particular subjects. This investigation of librarians’ perceptions of information avoidance indicates that there is no real consensus, at least not among the librarians answering the survey, regarding what should be considered "information avoidance”. Within scientific research tools to research and understand the intricacies of information avoidance, as well as information seeking, seem to be warranted. The view of individuals either as information seekers, "monitors”, or information avoiders, "blunters”, perhaps has some merits in some contexts, as in relation to information that could cause extreme fear and anxiety (Miller 1987, p. 345). Often, though, to consider an individual either an information seeker or information avoider could be a rather simplified model of human beings in relation to their information seeking and avoidance behavior.
Discussion

The purpose of this investigation has been to analyze perceptions and beliefs regarding information avoidance among librarians working at universities in USA. The intention has also been to find out about what experiences these librarians have of information avoidance.

Several librarians in the survey claim that they are unfamiliar with the concept "information avoidance" and state that they have difficulties understanding what information avoidance could be. In the essay it is suggested that it is possible that the librarians have difficulties speaking and thinking of information avoidance if this concept not is part of a discourse which is familiar to them.

The librarians in the survey, in many some cases, interpret the notion "information avoidance" quite differently. Their answers about their experiences of and beliefs about information avoidance depend on how they understand the meaning of the concept "information avoidance" as well as "information". If they have a quite narrow view of what information could mean in this context they may not consider information avoidance very frequent. If, on the other hand, they have a wider understanding of what information is they might believe that information avoidance occurs constantly. One finding in this investigation is that the librarians in the survey have quite different views on how information avoidance, and possibly also information, should be understood. Also, the concept "information avoidance" isn’t familiar to all librarians.

In their email messages the librarians express different beliefs about how common information avoidance is and how important it is, if, in fact, it is a problem. The librarians email messages could be classified into groups, based on the beliefs expressed in them as well as based on the experiences the librarians claim to have. In one of the groups of messages the librarians claim that they believe that information avoidance not is very common at all, while a belief is expressed in other messages that information avoidance not is common at the university but quite frequent outside of it. The librarians in the survey also claim to have different experiences of information avoidance; some claim to frequently experience it at the library and at the university while others experience it outside of the university context. Some librarians don’t have much experiences of information avoidance but suspect it to be a common phenomenon, while others experience it but think it isn’t very common. Hence, the librarians’ belief about the importance or frequency of
information avoidance is not necessarily connected to their own perceptions or experiences of the phenomenon. As has been mentioned, Heidegger claims that we tend to see what it spoken about rather than speak about what we see (Moran 2000, p. 234). Even though the librarians in some cases acknowledge that they have seen and perceived that students avoid information they still believe that it is not a very frequent behavior. Heidegger, as has been mentioned previously, believes that we are controlled by emotions rather than by logical reasoning (Moran 2000, p. 228). Some of the librarians in the survey might at times have a difficulty to look at and understand the students at the university with objectivity. Their opinions and beliefs about the students and the university might be influenced by their emotions and they might prefer to think that a behavior as information avoidance, which could be understood as a negative behavior in relation to education, is inexisten, or at least uncommon, at the university where they work.

The experiences and beliefs of the librarians in the survey regarding information avoidance demonstrate most differences in relation to the library, university and the students. In some email messages the librarians claim to have no experiences of information avoidance from their work at the university or at the library, or that they can’t remember any experiences of it from this context, and they often recognize that they don’t think much about this phenomenon. In some cases the librarians do experience or suspect that the students avoid information but are quite forgiving and benevolent in their interpretation of the reasons for this behavior, and tend to believe that it isn’t a very frequent or important behavior. These librarians often express what might be interpreted as a somewhat idealistic, or perhaps ”romantic”, view of the students’ information seeking behavior and their relation to their education and research assignments. Other librarians claim that they frequently observe students avoiding information, and it might be inferred from their messages that they do consider information avoidance to be a problem and a quite common behavior among students at the university where they work. These librarians often express that their experiences are that the students frequently are uninterested in their research topics and are reluctant to dedicate time to their research. Instead these students’ main interest is to finish their research assignment as fast as possible even if it means that they have to avoid some information or use information of inferior quality.

Usually the librarians write about the world of the university and the library separately from the world outside of the university. One interpretation might be that some of the librarians perceive of the academic world, or the university where they work, as somehow disconnected or apart from the rest of society and the world. At the same time some librarians mention that the students sometimes could be distracted by activities that they consider more entertaining than information seeking and the learning of information associated with their education or research assignments, and these entertaining activities might be related to the world outside
of the university. In many cases the librarians write about the information avoidance of "people" and it is not obvious if the students, teachers and researchers at the universities and the librarians themselves are meant to be included in or excluded from "people", even though it sometimes could be inferred from their answers.

Lack of time, lack of interest, and indolence are often mentioned as reasons for information avoidance by the librarians in the survey. People and students, according to some of the librarians in the survey, often prefer to avoid information when it requires efforts to find it, read it, understand it, or learn how to search for it. Other librarians consider much of this information avoidance to be caused by lack of time rather than that the student or person in question is lazy or lacks interest in the research topic.

Fear can also cause information avoidance, according to several librarians in the survey. They generally write about fear of the technology necessary in some forms of information retrieval and fear, or trepidation, related to the reference situation at the library and write less about fear about the content of the information.

Many librarians in the survey also believe that people often tend to avoid information which contradicts their beliefs and opinions.

Information avoidance is also described by some of the librarians in the survey as something which can be imposed on people and students, for instance in the way history is presented, or by unsuitable information systems used at libraries. The information found in the environment by "accident" or by chance is also considered to possibly lead to information avoidance if, for instance, the first information that is found accidentally is accepted and selected and other, perhaps more relevant, information is avoided or ignored. Customized search results and customized news also lead to information avoidance according to some librarians in the survey, and this form of information avoidance might also be considered imposed on the individual rather than always being a result of conscious choices.

Information overload is one of the reasons for information avoidance that is most frequently mentioned by the librarians in the survey, and it is sometimes referred to in connection to a lack of information literacy; some librarians believe that people avoid information because they lack a capacity to filter all accessible information and for this reason avoid irrelevant as well as relevant information.

The librarians in the survey often express a belief that we live in a particular "age", an "information age", in which we are overwhelmed by information. At the same time as many librarians in the survey claim that we are overwhelmed by all the information that is available, or is forced upon us, librarians in the survey also refer to what has been called the "Internet filter bubble" in which we, in the information age, often live trapped, sheltered from information that not is customized to us. Even though there might be an excessive amount of information accessible to us we are not necessarily more informed, in particular not about what might be considered important to us, but might instead be living involved in what Heidegger
calls "idle talk" and live our lives limited to absorbing and communicating "public knowledge" (Moran 2000, p. 120) without thinking about the meaning of this alleged "knowledge". A form of information avoidance, mentioned by one librarian in the survey [11], might be to not fully absorb or understand the information even though we might, in a superficial, "inauthentic" way, be told of its content. Often we don't "appropriate", information or knowledge, making it our "own" as if it was a part of our being or our self, as Ricoeur suggests we should do to reach understanding (2008, p. 114-115).

This essay probably raises more questions than it answers. In fact, it doesn't conclusively answer questions about the beliefs and experiences of information avoidance of all librarians working at universities in USA, but some indications about these beliefs and experiences have been revealed in the course of the investigation. These indications might function as a foundation for further research about information avoidance in which qualitative or quantitative methods could be used. These studies don't necessarily have to concern exclusively librarians working at universities in USA but could also involve other groups working with information, research and education. Some of the librarians in the survey express beliefs and write about experiences exclusively in relation to the libraries at the universities but most of them also write about their experiences and beliefs in relation to other contexts. It might be considered probable or possible that other groups working with information might have similar experiences of and beliefs about the reasons for information avoidance as librarians working at universities in USA.

The possible information avoidance among students at universities is a subject which merits further research. Several librarians in the survey claim that they have experiences of students avoiding information relating to their education. The librarians often express their beliefs about the reasons for the students' information avoidance, but the students themselves are likely to know even more about the real reason why they avoid information. Some librarians in the survey claim that it is lack of time which causes the students' information avoidance, but it is not always clear if this lack of time for information seeking and research is the result of the students not being given enough time to finish their research assignments or if the students spend their time on other activities than research. The librarians in the survey also sometimes state that the students often are assigned to research a subject of which they have no interest. Is it possible to assign subjects that the students consider more interesting and still have the same value in their education? How do the students spend their time? These seem to be questions that warrant further investigation.

The relation between information overload and information avoidance is also a subject which requires further study. It might be helpful to further define which forms of communication and information the information overload is believed to be consisting of and which excess of information leads to most information avoidance.
Hopefully this essay will not be completely avoided or ignored but instead lead to a constructive discussion and dialogue and increase the awareness about information avoidance, as well as function as an inspiration for further research about this phenomenon.
Summary

This essay describes how the phenomenon information avoidance is perceived and experienced by academic librarians working at universities in USA and what their beliefs are regarding the reasons behind this phenomenon.

In the analysis a method is used which has its theoretical foundation in Heidegger’s, Gadamer’s and Ricoeur’s hermeneutics and phenomenology.

The investigation is based on an email survey in which librarians working at universities in USA answer questions about what experiences they have of information avoidance and what beliefs they have about the reasons for people’s information avoidance. The librarians email messages are examined using a thematic analysis as well as, to some extent, Hayden White’s theory for narrative structures and modes. In the interpretations the ”hermeneutic circle” is used. The librarians email messages are analyzed comparing parts of the messages to the whole amount of the messages or to the context of research in relation to information avoidance.

In their email messages the librarians express beliefs that people avoid information because of information overload, lack of time, and lack of interest in the content of the information. They also believe that some people avoid information because of indolence and fear. Customized search results and customized news on the Internet could also, according to some librarians in the survey, lead to information avoidance. According to several librarians in the survey people might also have a tendency to avoid information that contradicts their opinions and beliefs.

The librarians often express that they have different experiences of and beliefs about information avoidance, and in particular regarding how perceivable, common, and important this phenomenon is at the university where they work. Some librarians have much experience of students avoiding information at the universities, while others claim that they have no, or can’t remember any such experiences, or have experiences of the phenomenon but don’t consider it to be a very frequent or important problem.

A scale is suggested to be used as a tool in research to enable the assessment of the level desire to avoid information.

The findings and indications presented in this essay are suggested to be used in further research about information avoidance.
References

Unpublished material
Email messages in author’s possession, in chronological order:
Email from [1], Librarian, Maryland, 2014-02-05.
Email from [2], Librarian, Connecticut, 2014-02-06.
Email from [3], Librarian, Missouri, 2014-02-07.
Email from [4], Librarian, Washington, 2014-02-07.
Email from [5], Librarian, Missouri, 2014-02-10.
Email from [6], Librarian, New York, 2014-02-10.
Email from [7], Librarian, California, 2014-02-10.
Email from [8], Librarian, New York, 2014-02-11.
Email from [9], Librarian, New York, 2014-02-11.
Email from [10], Librarian, Oregon, 2014-02-11.
Email from [11], Librarian, Massachusetts, 2014-02-11.
Email from [12], Librarian, Massachusetts, 2014-02-12.
Email from [13], Librarian, Texas, 2014-02-12.
Email from [14], Librarian, Pennsylvania, 2014-02-12.
Email from [15], Librarian, Texas, 2014-02-12.
Email from [16], Librarian, California, 2014-02-12.
Email from [17], Librarian, Illinois, 2014-02-12.
Email from [18], Librarian, Indiana, 2014-02-13.
Email from [19], Librarian, Florida, 2014-02-13.
Email from [20], Librarian, California, 2014-02-14.
Email from [21], Librarian, New York, 2014-02-14.
Email from [22], Librarian, North Dakota, 2014-03-31.
Email from [23], Librarian, Idaho, 2014-04-01.
Email from [24], Librarian, Idaho, 2014-04-01.
Email from [25], Librarian, California, 2014-04-01.
Email from [26], Librarian, Massachusetts, 2014-04-02.
Email from [27], Librarian, Ohio, 2014-04-02.
Email from [28], Librarian, Illinois, 2014-04-02.
Published material


