Information Behavior, Information Overload, and Digital Well-Being During Crisis

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ABSTRACT

On October 7th, the Hamas terrorist organization invaded Israel, massacring and attacking civilians in Southern Israel. In response, the Israeli government declared a state of war. People in Israel sought information about the war to stay updated on real-time events. The current study aims to examine the consequences of information-seeking behavior and information overload of Israeli citizens during the war on their digital well-being. The study uses a qualitative approach, with 25 Israeli interviewees. The study's theoretical framework is based on Büchi's Digital well-being frame. The main findings present three users' profiles **a)** Information overload managers: Individuals who feel overwhelmed by information, leading them to limit their news consumption and balance their digital well-being. **b)** Multi-App news seekers: Users who actively employ multiple apps to access the most updated news from a wide range of sources, effectively managing their digital well-being. **c)** Information avoiders: Those who actively avoid information to protect their digital well-being. Meanwhile, individuals who passively avoid may experience anxiety.

KEYWORDS: Digital well-being, Information-seeking behavior, Information overload, Information anxiety, Information avoidance

INTRODUCTION

The Israel-Hamas war on the 7th of October has led to an unprecedented increase in citizens' information needs, particularly for news updates [1]. The war has prompted many Israelis, to return to the television screen [2], and at the same time, individuals rely on various social applications, including social media and messaging apps, motivated by the need to stay informed and reduce uncertainty [1]. The study was carried out according to Büchi's theoretical framework [13] which describes the connections between three variables: digital practices, immediate outcomes in the form of harms and benefits, and digital well-being. Information-seeking behavior, which is a process that involves the search for information in response to specific needs or goals from various sources [3], plays an important role in this framework. Excessive exposure to information [4] can result in information overload, hindering individuals from effectively utilizing available resources when an overwhelming amount of information is present [5]. Studies [10] suggest that information overload can result in both feelings of frustration and anxiety, defined as information anxiety [11], as well as information avoidance [12], which involves ignoring relevant information due to an overwhelming volume. This phenomenon has the potential to influence digital well-being.

Research questions

1. How did citizens experience the information-seeking during the war?
2. How did citizens cope with information overload during the war?
3. How were the citizens' digital well-being affected by the information-seeking process?

Research Population – Twenty-five Israeli citizens aged 20 and above were interviewed. All participants were asked to sign a consent form. The interviewees responded to a post that the researchers posted on Facebook. In addition, the "snowball" method [14] was used to recruit additional interviewees. Interviewees' average age was 47.8 (SD=6.42), with 12 females and 13 males. To ensure anonymity, interviewees are assigned a two-letter code: the first letter represents "M" for Male or "F" for Female, followed by a serial number.

Research Tools - The current study is based on qualitative research methods, consisting of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Israeli citizens.

Data Analysis – The data was collected between October 23rd and November 5th, 2023, covering the 3rd and 4th weeks of the war. The data were analyzed using the categorization technique to provide a broad perspective of the experiences of interviewees [7]. After analyzing and mapping the interviews, several major categories emerged. In the next phase, the researcher built a research framework addressing three major categories: information-seeking needs and sources, information overload, and digital well-being.

Credibility and validity of the research - To explore the reliability of the analysis, two coders (the researcher and another coder who is a Ph.D. candidate) analyzed the interviews. When the researcher and

the coder disagreed, they discussed it until they reached full agreement, resulting in a reliability score of 0.90.

Findings – The first research question **(RQ1)** relates to the information-seeking behavior during the war. Findings indicate that during the initial hours of the war, information was scarce. To obtain information individuals had to actively search through various sources. F7 described: "The sense was that getting information was really urgent, and the shock of not having enough information was so intense that it created feelings of helplessness and stress". However, as the war advanced, there was a significant shift in this pattern due to the overwhelming sense of information overload. M1 articulated the situation, stating: "I don't actively search for information; it's more like the information finds me". The primary source of information was WhatsApp, with twenty-four participants using it for communication with family and friends, while 17 used Facebook for both sharing and obtaining information. Additionally, nine participants declared that they utilized various other social media platforms including, Telegram, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram.

Regarding **RQ2**, which focuses on citizens' experiences with information overload, we have identified three user profiles that assist in coping with information overload. **a)** The primary group includes individuals who feel overwhelmed by information, leading them to limit their news consumption. One participant (M4) expressed this sentiment: "Getting information is similar to getting other things. I try to be smart about it. Sometimes I avoid taking in too much, or I set a limit. It's like the amount of alcohol in the supermarket – neither does it bother me nor does it keep me from going down a path of alcoholism". **b)** The second group consists of users who used multiple apps to access the most updated news from a wide range of sources as explained by M1: "I'm constantly bombarded with more information that I can handle, but I don't really see it as a problem – it's just how I prefer it. I like gathering information from 7 to 10 different sources to see if there's anything new out there". **c)** The third group, passively or actively avoids information. Five respondents identified themselves as Ultra-Orthodox (Jews whose distinctiveness lies in their strict religious practices, [14]), and on the 7th of October, which was both a holiday and Shabbat, they refrained from using any digital media. This lack of information increased anxiety, as expressed by M6: "It's when you feel a significant gap in information. You spend the whole Shabbat really on edge, feeling a lot of stress because you know something's going on and the lack of information about it is just awful". On the other hand, F5, a non-religious individual, actively avoids any connection to digital or print media: "I completely limit myself from the media, and I believe that it's actually makes a difference because staying connected is a personal challenge for me".

R3 examined the impact of digital media consumption on the citizens' digital well-being. Most of the participants (23) expressed varied feelings of fear and pressure resulting from disturbing information on digital media. Participant M13 illustrates a connection between his digital media experience and its impact on his digital well-being: "You watch a horrific video, and instead of taking a moment to process it, you quickly switch to reading or watching something else. You may even avoid crying because you constantly need to consume something else, and this stress builds up in your body".

Discussion, Recommendations, and Limitations – In line with previous studies conducted during crises [8] [9], the current research reveals that intensive information-seeking behavior impacts information overload. This increased information overload, in turn, gives rise to information anxiety and avoidance, ultimately affecting individuals' digital well-being. However, information overload is a subjective experience, and individuals employ various coping mechanisms to maintain their digital well-being. Consistent with prior studies [8], [15], individuals feeling overwhelmed and experiencing information overload limit their information consumption due to continuous exposure throughout the day. Conversely, those who actively seek every piece of information view information overload as a beneficial factor that fulfills their information needs. Similarly to past studies [10], those who recognized that increased information would be harmful, chose to avoid any kind of information and acknowledged its contribution to their digital well-being. Based on our conclusions, researchers recommend that individuals should be aware of both the adverse effects and advantages of information overload on their digital well-being and adjust their digital information-seeking accordingly. The research is qualitative and does not aim to offer a comprehensive representation of the entire population.

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