

# Digital hoarding

**Digital hoarding** (also known as **e-hoarding**, **datahoarding** or **cyberhoarding**) is excessive acquisition and reluctance to delete electronic material no longer valuable to the user.<sup>[1]</sup> The behavior includes the mass storage of digital artifacts and the retention of unnecessary or irrelevant electronic data. The term is increasingly common in pop culture, used to describe the habitual characteristics of compulsive hoarding, but in cyberspace. As with physical space in which excess items are described as "clutter" or "junk", excess digital media is often referred to as "digital clutter".<sup>[2][3][4]</sup>



Cluttered computer desktop, a common example of digital hoarding.

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## As a medical condition

Because of its non-physical nature, the condition does not show itself through physical clutter, meaning that it does not get classified as hoarding disorder.<sup>[5]</sup> As a consequence, it is often not recognized as a medical condition.<sup>[5]</sup> However, because digitization has greatly facilitated acquiring and storing large quanta of information (in terms of time and costs involved), digital hoarding tends to be a slow-moving progression, because even those affected by it do not display typical behaviors associated with hoarding.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Related concepts

Digital clutter is the term often used to describe the resulting (digital) artifacts of digital hoarding, but it should not be understood as exclusively the result of hoarding. Digital clutter can be created as a side-effect of high occurrences of another user activity, such as the computer desktop icons created through frequent installation of applications. In such a case the clutter does not reflect the user's intent to hoard.

Housekeeping is the term often used to refer to the activity by which digital clutter moves out of the 'clutter' designation, either by being thrown away, or by the recognition of its importance, thus no longer making it part of the 'clutter'.

## Virtual spaces

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Digital hoarding occurs in any electronic spaces where information is stored. These are common areas where digital clutter may exist:

- Browser tabs
- Excessive desktop icons
- Digital photographs
- Old documents
- Electronic file folders
- Email inboxes
- Internet bookmarks no longer being referenced
- Music and movie files
- Old software/computer programs/apps no longer being used

A cluttered email inbox arises when a user does not have a system for archiving some messages and deleting others that are no longer wanted. Electronic documents can become clutter if a user does not delete extraneous files, or if the files are poorly organized (e.g. inconsistent folder structure, empty folders).

Some social media platforms also provide opportunity for digital hoarding. On the social networking site Facebook, for example, one can accumulate a vast number of “friends” that may merely be acquaintances or lapsed contacts or even complete strangers.<sup>[6]</sup> Groups and Pages can also contribute to clutter when users join and like new ones, respectively, without leaving or unfollowing those in which they are no longer interested.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Causes

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Digital hoarding stems from a variety of individual traits and habits, corporate conditions, and societal trends:

- Some individuals experience anxiety when faced with disposing of digital items,<sup>[7]</sup> particularly if they fear losing something important.<sup>[8]</sup>
- Many digital hoarders don't know how to organize their digital content or aren't in the habit of doing so, and they lack a methodology for determining which content is worth keeping.<sup>[7]</sup>
- Keeping all of one's digital files requires less time and effort than evaluating and deleting them.<sup>[9]</sup>
- Many businesses rely on email correspondence for decision-making and formal approvals, so employees are often careful to keep work emails in case they are needed to verify a decision later.
- Data storage devices are now so large and inexpensive that individuals and companies often do not feel the need to save data selectively.<sup>[10][11]</sup>
- The widespread availability and rapid dissemination of open content on the Internet makes it easier for users to obtain digital media, which can accumulate more quickly than ever.
- Since digital media do not take up physical space, they're less likely to be perceived as clutter, and users can more easily forget the extent of what they own.
- Unlike many physical items, electronic content does not age or decay on its own; users must consciously choose to delete it.<sup>[12]</sup>

# Repercussions

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Digital hoarding can lead to many problems:

- Excessive digital content takes up more hard drive space than it merits, and may even require the addition of extra digital storage to one's computer or mobile phone.
- Server farms use more electricity as they need more disk drives. The extra load is especially notable in corporate domains.<sup>[13]</sup> This adds to an individual's or company's electricity expenses and carbon footprint.<sup>[13]</sup>
- Digital clutter can be mentally draining, requiring time and attention. For example, hoarded emails can make an inbox seem overwhelming. The user wastes time sifting through excess emails, which can result in lowered employee productivity.<sup>[14]</sup>
- Digital hoarding can create an unhealthy attachment to digital content and foster a sort of "media addiction."<sup>[2]</sup> It is often good for one's mental health to let go of useless clutter, and decluttering digital devices can help with decluttering the mind.<sup>[15]</sup>

## In the media

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Many American documentary television series depict the struggles of compulsive hoarders, such as *Hoarding: Buried Alive* on TLC and *Hoarders* on A&E. These shows have popularized awareness of hoarding, showing the consequences of accumulating clutter. However, these programs usually focus on physical hoarding. The WPTV story of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, resident Larry Fisher is a notable exception. This program focused on digital hoarding, depicting Fisher's longstanding refusal to delete any digital content. Instead, Fisher purchased an additional computer every time he ran out of hard drive space.<sup>[16]</sup> The BBC News story of Washington, D.C., resident Chris Yurista expresses a counterpoint to this perspective. The program portrayed Yurista as a "21st century minimalist" for living with hardly any physical assets, substituting digital goods wherever possible.<sup>[17]</sup>

## Criticism

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Though digital hoarding is often given a negative connotation, some counter that it is not an unhealthy or detrimental practice. One argument states that a large amount of digital content is not a problem in itself; rather, the problem is content findability. The size of the World Wide Web illustrates this point: a vast amount of content is available, but search engines such as Google have mastered effective algorithms for instantaneous findability. Digital hoarding can also be logical for email correspondence. Businesses often use email as the primary form of communication, so deleting conversations and documents that seem unimportant could be problematic if they are needed later.<sup>[18]</sup> Disk storage is increasingly abundant and inexpensive, so concern over the cost of digital hoarding is rarely necessary. In addition, digital hoarding is clearly more benign than physical hoarding, which is more visible and takes up physical space.<sup>[9]</sup> Finally, on a subjective level, digital hoarding can hardly be viewed as problematic if the consumer simply does not feel burdened by their collection of digital data.

## See also

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- Harold T. Martin III
- Web archiving
- Digital preservation
- Compulsive hoarding

- Prepping

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## Further reading

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