

Life and Times of Personal Information Management: Memento, memory, or memento mori?

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ABSTRACT

This panel/round-table discussion will explore contemporary challenges within our everyday personal information management practices when it comes to how we select, store, and prepare our life histories for ourselves and others. With all the affordances and access provided by digital technologies, we collect information across a variety of platforms, modes, and mediums, be they documents, text files, images, or audio. Not all of this information is meaningful to us in the long-term, but nevertheless, some of our most valuable information does get entangled in this chaos. Issues discussed include maintaining, organizing, and accessing our information, not to mention how others access what we want to pass on to them. Challenges include technological obsolescence, privacy concerns, cultural and generational changes, family dynamics, and even memory loss as we age. We will also explore solutions and propose an 'idea box' for how we can prepare for the future of our personal information, such as creating and implementing information legacy plans, digitization, storage, and access permissions.

KEYWORDS

Personal Information Management; Life Histories; Technology Across the Lifespan; Digital Afterlife; Materiality of Memories; Personal Archives Management

INTRODUCTION

Memento: Lists are the only way out of this mess. — Jonathan Nolan, *Memento Mori*

Memory: Who is it that can tell me who I am? — Shakespeare, *King Lear*

Memento mori: All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, and mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt. — Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

The organization of personal information in everyday life is problematic due to issues such as temporal and spatial factors, including the passage of time, along with the differences in the affective, cognitive, and psychosocial environment between when the information was organized and when the information is retrieved. These are compounded by technological factors. We will outline the implications of these for personal information management (PIM) and point toward the need for a contextually sensitive model of personal information organization that reflects the relation between information objects, information representation, information users, and their anticipated information retrieval needs. McKenzie and Davies (2015) analyzed temporal aspects of personal information management work and found that multiple temporalities are negotiated locally according to socially situated priorities. Hence, classifying, documenting, and coordinating multiple temporalities and contexts is an important aspect of personal information management. Beyond these, human aspects such as memory also play a big role in all of this; our information could always be at hand, but if our memory is not, none of that information serves its intended purpose for us.

According to Taylor (2004), we organize because we need to retrieve, and there seems to be a basic drive in humans to organize, and psychologists tell us that even babies' brains organize images into categories such as faces or foods and that children do a lot of information organizing during play. These may also be a part of our evolutionary impulse (Spink & Currier, 2006). Jones describes our human organizing behaviors in terms of a desire to keep found things found for future use (Jones, 2007). In the literature, many of the studies in regard to organizing

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information fall into either the area of cataloging and classification studies (as in Library Studies) or under Personal Information Management (Jones and Maier, 2003) with a specific focus on an individual's personal information, and focus on tools and technologies. As the dichotomy between our work and non-work contexts is steadily disappearing (Mckenzie & Davies, 2015), along with the delineation between organizers and users, everyday users are now using professional systems to organize their personal information, but without the same training. There is little research about how the broad range of information and documents, including personal records, are managed in the home. (Balogh, Billigsley, Paul & Kennan, 2022).

Narayan (2013) wrote that "One of the major issues found in information organization is the inter-subjectivity in communicating a concept or *aboutness* – the subject or topic association of a document that may or may not be a term within the document itself – of an information artifact between the person who may have organized the information and the person looking for that same information. Increasingly though, we are not just looking for information within collections that have been designed by someone else, but within our own personal collections of information, which frequently include books, electronic files, photos, records, documents, desktops, Web bookmarks, and portable devices. The passage of time between when we categorized or classified the information, and the time when we look for the same information, poses several problems of intra-subjectivity, or the difference between our own past and present perceptions of the same information. Information searching, and hence the retrieval of information from one's own collection of information in everyday life involved spatial and temporal coordination with one's own past selves in a sort of cognitive and affective time travel, just as organizing information is a form of anticipatory coordination with one's future information needs. This involves a lot of cognitive coordination, and consequently, a lot of confusion." (p. 25)

This panel will explore some of the philosophical aspects of projecting ourselves into the future in order to organize information now. Narayan & Olsson (2014) wrote that "Documents are semiotic signifiers (Saussure, 1983), waiting for a person to interpret them. Like people, they can talk to us, but cannot tell us what they mean. This meaning is created and communicated from within us. Information searching, and hence the retrieval of information from one's own collection of information in everyday life involves coordination with one's own past selves in a sort of time travel, just as organizing information is a form of anticipatory coordination with one's future information needs. The problems arise due to the differences between the intended use of the information and its actual use at a future date. Creating and using organization schemas for information is a coordination of meaning between oneself and others (inter-subjectivity, as described by Berlin et al., 1993), and also involves cognitive coordination between one's own past and present selves (which we call intra-subjectivity) since the person organizing the information and the person retrieving it later in time is one and the same person, and yet not the same. This self-coordination is fraught with problems, for the longer the time between the two, the more changes are likely to have happened within oneself, changing the meaning of information." (p.6)

Cognition plays a prominent role in the sense-making of personal information, and research by Zijlema, Van den Hoven, and Eggen (2019) described how different types of mental representations exist, and personal information thus differs in what they cue to the owner. Longitudinal research (Zijlema, 2018) also demonstrated the dynamic nature of people's memories with their personal possessions. While some memories are strongly linked to their possessions and are brought nearly always to mind when seeing the object, the cued representations can change over time, such as cuing new (recent) events or changes in the emotions towards the object.

Reyes (2017) believes personal information management, memory, and cognition are all connected, as memory is the basis necessary to carry out the primary PIM functions of receiving, generating, keeping, using, organizing, re-finding (especially), and sharing. Studies have shown that computer use improves older adults' cognitive functions. Before PIM was researched as a technical topic, there were studies conducted in the field of psychology and philosophy by Bartlett (1932), for example, that demonstrated how difficult it is to understand memory by which he meant that "it is impossible to understand any high-level mental process if it is simply studied by and for itself." (p. 186). He described the principle as one that was involved with the psychology of an individual's memory and how and why people remember. In examining the importance that memory and cognition contribute to the process of PIM, Reyes (2022) has found that when it comes to aging adults, memory is the key component of managing personal information that may hinder the process of PIM. As we age, we struggle to remember where we put things, and how to access our own materials.

Finally, the panel will also reflect deeply on the use/uselessness of all our PIM in cases of dementia, which is increasingly foregrounded in contemporary times, and has been compounded by the global pandemic and its associated lockdowns, social isolation, and lack of complex social interactions (Numbers & Brodaty, 2021). Many of those affected have lived long lives, and have accumulated valuable information, objects, and memories. As a consequence of this disease, their ability to retrieve and give meaning to personal information may fade or become unstable. However, the value of the memories and knowledge we collect throughout our lives does not diminish.

These experiences and insights help to shape who we are as individuals and can provide a sense of comfort and connection, even if they are not immediately accessible due to dementia. The knowledge and insights that individuals have gained throughout their lives can also be valuable to others, even if the individual with dementia is no longer able to directly benefit from them.

PANEL PROPOSAL

The panel session will be highly participatory and will provide flexibility to explore topics that reflect the interests and expertise of those in attendance. Some of these topics may include:

- **Technological Obsolescence:** As technology advances rapidly, old forms of personal information may become obsolete and difficult to access.
- **Privacy Concerns:** Many people are concerned about the privacy and security of their personal information. This can make people hesitant to pass on personal information to future generations.
- **Generational Cultural Changes:** Cultural norms and expectations can change rapidly over time. What may have been acceptable to one generation may be considered inappropriate or offensive to another.
- **Family Dynamics:** Family relationships can be complex, and not all family members may be interested in preserving or passing on personal information. This can also create tensions within families.
- **Memory Loss:** As people age, they may experience memory loss or other cognitive impairments that can make it difficult to recall important information.

Some of the solutions proposed over time have been:

- **Creating a legacy plan:** A legacy plan is a document that outlines how we want your personal and digital assets to be managed and distributed after our death, including instructions for how to access important documents, passwords to online accounts, and other relevant information.
- **Using cloud storage:** Cloud storage services allow us to store and access your personal information from anywhere with an internet connection, to ensure that our personal information is backed up and accessible to us and our loved ones even if our physical devices are lost, stolen, or damaged.
- **Digitizing personal information:** By digitizing our personal information, we can ensure that it is easily accessible and shareable with future generations. This can include scanning old photographs and documents, creating digital copies of important records and certificates, and digitizing home movies and other media.
- **Using PIM-specific software tools, such as a password manager:** Password managers can help you manage our online accounts and passwords, and ensure that our trusted family members can access our accounts if needed.
- **Writing a memoir:** Writing a memoir can be a valuable way to share our personal experiences and insights with future generations, and provide a window into our unique perspectives and experiences.

Despite the seemingly simple best practices above, such PIM literacy is not part of the everyday information practices for everyone, either due to lack of guidance, information, or time. Alon and Nachmias (2020) found significant gaps between the actual and ideal usage of PIM practices. These gaps were mostly positive, revealing that participants wished to use more practices than they actually did, and were not satisfied with their PIM behavior. What can information literacy advocates do about this?

PANELISTS

The panel brings together three researchers from three different continents who are all passionate about personal information management, both as a discipline and as an everyday practice, and wish to foreground their importance and relevance in our environment of information overload and find solutions to issues that often go unnoticed until it is too late.

Bhuva Narayan

Dr. Bhuva Narayan is an Associate Professor, Digital Social Media in the School of Communication, and Director of Graduate Research at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Bhuva is the Associate Editor of the Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association and on the Editorial Board of ARIST, Education for Information, and DOCAM. Bhuva is a transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary researcher across Information Science, Internet Studies, Digital Media Studies, and Privacy Literacy, with additional expertise in IT, HCI, and UX, and applies this expertise in the context of social justice issues. As an Australian LIS educator with an MLIS from the iSchool at the University of Pittsburgh and a Ph.D. in Human Information Behaviors from the Queensland University of Technology, Bhuva brings a unique comparative perspective to the issues discussed. Lately, Bhuva's interests are in supporting the information needs of people and families as they age, through various technological and non-technological solutions. Bhuva has participated in two ASIS&T workshops on PIM and has recently published a

paper at ALT-CHI with Prof. William Jones titled It's about Time: Let's Do More to Support the Process of Aging (vs. the State of Being "Old").

Annemarie Zijlema

Dr. Annemarie Zijlema is a Lecturer at the School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences at the University of Greenwich. She obtained her Ph.D. degree with the *Materialising Memories* program at the University of Technology Sydney. She has a strong interest in cognitive processes in relation to external cues, such as objects in the home, in the public space, or information on the web. She holds an International Master's degree in Library and Information Science from the Royal School of Library and Information Science in Copenhagen and obtained her bachelor's degree in Information Services and Management from the Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen. Her Ph.D. research focused on personal possessions as cues for autobiographical remembering.

Vanessa Reyes

Dr. Vanessa Reyes is an Assistant Professor of Instruction for the School of Information at the University of South Florida and Editor-in-Chief of the Florida Libraries Journal. She holds a Ph.D. in Library and Information Science from Simmons College, an M.S. in Library and Information Studies from Florida State University, and a B.A. in English from Florida International University. Having worked in archives, legislative, university, and public libraries, she became interested in exploring the PIM field when she noticed that researchers' interest was sparked when they used appropriately organized and preserved personal collections for scholarly work. Her current research contributes to the emerging field of personal information management (PIM), quantifying how individual users are organizing, managing, and preserving digital information. Dr. Reyes is finding ways to make a sustainable difference in how our digital heritage is preserved by examining trends in how individual users are managing and preserving their information.

STRUCTURE OF THE PANEL

Each panelist will present a 15-minute summary of their own research and experience and reflect on their implications. A 10-minute period following each panel member's presentation will be open for discussion. During this time, the audience will be engaged in the discussion of the panel's contribution, and be encouraged to contribute information from their own local perspective that is relevant to the global issues identified by the panel. We will also use an interactive audience platform such as Mentimeter to interact with the participants. Toward the end of the session, for the last 15 minutes, we will do an activity called the Lightning Decision Jam that will provide the participants with some concrete decisions and takeaways they can implement in their own practice or in their teaching. All three panelists will act as moderators for the session in turn, as well as present their own contributions as members of the panel. During the 90-minute period, approximately half will be dedicated to open discussion.

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