

PIM and death: challenges and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

In this position statement for the PIM Workshop at ASIS&T'22 I outline my growing interest in exploring the importance of death for personal information management, and vice versa.

KEYWORDS

Personal information management, death, post-mortem collection management, digital legacy, PIM workshop

POSITION STATEMENT

Introduction – I have argued previously (Dinneen, 2021) that the study of personal information management (PIM) has generally focused on, or perhaps been preoccupied with, acute and daily practical matters, like faster or easier re-finding of files and emails. Though such work is undoubtedly important for supporting life's many roles and goals (Jones et al., 2017), it nonetheless has shown a tendency so far to ignore broader or less immediate existential concerns, like birth, aging, and death. Evidence of this is emerging from a systematic review I am currently conducting of literature about information management and death: only a few PIM publications acknowledge death, noting for example that collections persist after death and might be inherited or lost (Jones et al., 2016; Krtalić et al., 2021), and one master's thesis explicitly engages with the intersection of PIM and thanatology (or *death studies*; Marková, 2011).

While scholars from the broader field of human-computer interaction (HCI) have acknowledged a similar gap in their focus (Kaptelinin, 2016) and responded with considerable efforts and numerous studies and publications, those have focused almost exclusively on social media, examining for example people's social media profiles/data (Brubaker & Callison-Burch, 2016) and memorialisation (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011). This work has been important and impactful. But just as a Facebook user may write a couple thousand comments in their lifetime, many of which are no doubt meaningful, the average computer user also has tens of thousands of computer files (Dinneen et al., 2019) and again as many email messages (Dinneen & Krtalić, 2020). Like comments or posts, these items can contain or comprise personal and detailed evidence of people's social and professional lives, like photos and media collections, receipts, wedding vows, forms, projects, notes and to-do lists, calendars, and personal knowledge management databases or *second brains* (Dinneen & Julien, 2019). And just as many Facebook users die each year and leave behind digital traces of their lives, so too do people leave behind digital personal collections of other kinds. These are naturally in various states of accessibility, with varying degrees of value for the deceased's families or society, and with or without explicit instructions about what should be done with them. The result is numerous conceptual and practical challenges for individuals, institutions, and society, some of which are highly relevant to PIM.

Example problems at the intersection of PIM and death – It is often not clear what could or should be done with someone's digital, personal collection after their death, because explicit instructions are often not given; people recognise the value in planning for their digital legacy, but usually avoid doing so (Holt et al., 2021). Intuitions about what should be done seem to be as varied as the possible circumstances that would help determine an answer. Deleting a collection might protect someone's privacy, but might also erase a part of their existence that is valuable to the bereaved for maintaining a connection to and memory of the deceased. On the other hand, *keeping* collections might not be sustainable, because the rate of new stored data is outpacing the production of both available electricity and new storage space, so *deleting* collections might often be the desirable thing to do (Hellmich & Dinneen, 2022). Something in-between might be desirable, like manually examining the collection and choosing what to preserve, but this is often impractical due to the scale of such collections (Dinneen et al., 2019). Sometimes, these collections are clearly important (e.g. for the deceased's family or for society) and explicitly donated or inherited (Society of American Archivists, 2013), but are at risk of being lost or rendered unusable, for example through benign neglect or a lack of literacy on the part of the inheritor, or simply because their scale and organisation (and a lack of annotation or guidance) makes them impractical to examine, make sense of, and browse (Day & Krtalić, 2022; Krtalić et al., 2021, Krtalić & Dinneen 2022).

So far I have mentioned only issues surrounding the collections and their pre- and post-mortem management, but there is of course more to the intersection of PIM and death than that; for example, both planning for one's own death and responding to the death of a family member will also entail collecting, storing, managing, and (re)finding highly personal information and documents, and thus will entail unique practical (and emotional) challenges and add to the existing set of PIM burdens (Cushing & Kerrigan, 2022). Planning for death is also an opportunity to reflect

on life, and so the role that a deeply personal and long-amassed information collection can play in that reflection should be further explored.

Possible PIM responses – Addressing these problems requires understanding people’s perspectives, desires, skills, challenges, and available tools, as well as the nature, contents, and structure of their collections (Dinneen & Julien, 2020), and then integrating that understanding into helpful tools (e.g. software), services (e.g. information literacy programs), and advice (e.g. recommendations from PIM experts). I believe PIM research is well-positioned to do this, and that it need not address only the post-mortem challenges: addressing PIM and death can be done through life-long processes and tools used at all stages of life and thus can contribute to people’s successful aging.

How to *best* address the role of death in PIM and successful aging is what I hope to discuss at the workshop. Initial ideas include conducting relevant PIM research of course, but also importantly, drawing on relevant existing work and perspectives to conduct that research in a way that is ethical and respectful of diverse values, perspectives on death, etc. Studies might explore people’s perspectives and challenges around planning for a collection’s management after death and compare results across groups, so that purpose-made tools can be designed to aid individuals performing pre- and post-mortem collection management. Ideally such tools would support explicating desires for post-mortem collection management without being obtrusive during daily tasks, for example through an optional annotation layer (c.f. Dinneen et al., 2022) or occasional reminders. Such tools might also explicitly present themselves as *digital legacy managers* and possibly inject dignity into the otherwise administrative nature of collection management; for example, some bereaved might appreciate if erasing a deceased loved one’s collection could be presented in a way more noted or momentous than unceremoniously deleting a file that was accidentally downloaded.

Regarding works to draw on, I imagine there are relevant insights present in existing PIM literature not mentioned here that will surface during discussion at the workshop. There are also no doubt useful works from other fields; my ongoing review mentioned above has so far revealed over 300 publications across fields like library and information science (LIS, including personal digital archiving, information behaviour, and information literacy) and HCI but also law, sociology, medicine, and philosophy. Other relevant works from HCI, which PIM studies have yet to utilise, include thanatosensitive design (Massimi & Charise, 2009) and the role of interactive technologies in bereavement (Odom et al., 2010). There are also many relevant perspectives that might help PIM research further transcend its focus on convenience and productivity, and its somewhat anti-theoretical tradition, to also consider what *should* (in the moral sense) be done or not done with personal information, what tools should be made, and how they should be designed and implemented. Examples I find promising include value-sensitive design (Friedman, 1996); information ethics, which acknowledges that people *are* their information (Floridi, 2013); ethics of care (suggested by workshop participant Amber Cushing, 2022); and participatory research and design (c.f. Berger et al., 2019).

Conclusion – PIM research has so far focused mostly on "digital lives" rather than digital deaths (e.g. Reyes 2020). But death, through its inevitability, its opportunity for reflection on life, and its impact on the living, is a constant accompaniment to life, and thus is both a support and challenge for successful aging. I hope the position outlined here will stimulate discussion at the workshop and inspire PIM researchers to engage the problems and opportunities at the intersection of PIM and death.

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