Organising for Life: Memento, memory, or memento mori? A Personal Reflection

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"Who is it that can tell me who I am?" King Lear, Shakespeare

Me: Hello uncle, how are you?
Uncle: Hello! Happy to meet you. What is your name?
Me: Uncle! I am your favourite niece, Bhuva!!
Uncle: Is that so? I don't recall. Where do you live?
Me: I live in Sydney – you visited with me four years ago, and we had so much fun traveling.
Uncle: Is that so? I don't recall.
Me [showing him all the photos from his own photo album]: Do you remember now? Now? This one? How about this one?
Uncle: I can see that it's me in the photos, so I guess I must have visited you. But I'm sorry I don't recall.

In my previous papers (Narayan & Spink, 2011; Narayan, 2013; Narayan & Olsson 2014), all based on empirical findings, I had argued that organization of information in everyday life is problematic due to issues such as temporal and spatial factors, including 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. I outlined the implications of these for information organization schemas and pointed toward the need for a contextually sensitive model of information organization that reflects the relation between information objects, information representation, information users, and their anticipated information retrieval needs.

However, I have since come to an understanding that human aspects such as memory play a bigger 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. But first, a quick overview of the foundational literature on what has been written in this area.

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 information fall into either the area of cataloguing and classification studies (as in Library Studies) or under Personal Information Management (Jones and Maier, 2003). However, as the dichotomy between our work and non-work contexts are steadily disappearing, along with the delineation between organizers and users, everyday users are using professional systems to organise their personal information, but without the same training.

In 2013 (Narayan), I wrote that "One of the major issues found in information organisation 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 artefact between the person who may have organised 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 categorised 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 a spatial and temporal coordination with one's own past selves in a sort of cognitive and affective time travel, just as organising 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."

In 2014 (Narayan & Olsson), I wrote that "Documents are information carriers, just like people, and 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 a coordination with one's own past selves in a sort of time travel, just as organising 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 organisation 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 organising 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 wrought with problems, for the longer the time between the two, the more changes are likely to have happened within oneself, changing the meaning information."

Currently, my interests in PIM are threefold:

1. The philosophical aspect of projecting ourselves into the future to organise information now.
2. Using voice information systems for personal information organisation, for safe and healthy aging at home, and I currently have a study in progress tracking an aging person (also going blind) using Alexa to help them organise their everyday life information before they lose their sight completely.
3. I am also reflecting deeply on the use/uselessness of all our PIM in cases of dementia, which is increasingly common around me now. Five of my uncles, between the ages of 75-85, have all developed severe dementia within the last two years due to a lack of complex social interactions during pandemic isolation. These are people who have lived full lives and have accumulated so much valuable information, objects, and memories. None of it is relevant to them now.

Looking forward to online conversations as part of this workshop, as I am not attending ASIS&T in 2022.

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