

COVID-19 and the Ethics of Personal Information Management

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Problem statement

During the COVID-19 pandemic there were several global shifts in information policy and the treatment of personal data, which were, in general, counterproductive to data privacy and prosocial outcomes of information technology. For example, Facebook tried to use the *Privacy Shield* legislation to move Europeans' data (collected via facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram) to the United States, where it would no longer be protected by the EU GDPR, and further, would be visible to new parties under the US Patriot Act (Reuters Staff, 2020). Also during the pandemic, the tech giants made tremendous profits (Dwoskin, 2020), and as a direct result of accumulating wealth and power, are now arguably sovereign powers (Floridi, 2020) – but not democratically elected ones – able to influence elections (Aral & Eckles, 2019) and prevent the regulation that would limit their powers (Hollister, 2021). Meanwhile, to temper rising worries about the negative effects of artificial intelligence, Google established AI ethics groups, but this turned out to be performative (i.e., ethics washing) when they fired and attempted to discredit their employees for reporting on the outstanding issues with such technologies (Simonite, 2020).

Tracing such issues into the study of personal information management (PIM), I suggest that while PIM research has focused on practical matters like saving people time and effort, there is arguably also a strong *ethical* dimension and potential in PIM research that would be useful, now more than ever, to realise. Below I provide example issues and briefly consider how they might be addressed. For this extended abstract the points are necessarily brief and evocative rather than thorough and conclusive.

PIM systems to target key issues in information and data ethics

PIM can be understood, among other ways, as the activity of managing personal information – that is, managing one's own personal information as well as personally managing someone else's – and thus also as managing personal data (Jones *et al.*, 2017). Luciano Floridi (2016) argues that we should think of 'my data' more like 'my hand' than 'my car', because personal

data are constitutive of who we are, and abuse of such data therefore constitutes an ethical transgression. While this idea has implications for the ethics of *collecting* personal data – e.g., digital profiling could be argued to be non-consensual cloning – it also implies even the creation of tools for simply *managing* personal data and information is an ethical matter. In other words, providing people tools to better secure and control the flow of their personal data is an ethical action, and perhaps even morally obligated. It also seems such control should be defined beyond the usual PIM purview of storing, organising, and retrieving: one could argue that the effective erasure of personal data/information is *as important* as its storage because deleted information is the most secure kind (barring exceptional forensics) since it cannot be lost, stolen, ransomed, etc. Additional ethical implications to be considered include the control of personal data collected under exceptional circumstances (e.g., provided by customers entering shops during the COVID-19 pandemic) and avoiding the mismanagement of such data (e.g., properly obscuring prior customers' data from new customers), the management of group information (even in ordinary circumstances), digital identity management, and deleting to reduce carbon footprints.

PIM research could, and perhaps should explicitly address such ethical issues in the creation of new systems and services, including not only those for managing the usual PIM formats (like email and files) but also comprehensive personal data dashboards (Vitale *et al.*, 2020) and infrastructure to enable better Web data control (Sambra *et al.*, 2016). Regarding *how* such systems should be implemented, it seems likely that the current generation of AI will be as useful in PIM as it has been in other domains. However, such systems must be developed *very carefully* to minimise the numerous ethical issues with AI, small and large, from data and design to deployment, including issues with (as commonly categorised today) fairness, accountability, transparency, responsibility, environmental impact, and more (Bender *et al.*, 2021; Slavkovik, 2020). Useful emerging ideas and methodologies for encouraging ethical outcomes include data minimisation (Muller, 2021), co-design (Niedderer *et al.*, 2020), ethical foresight analysis (Floridi & Strait, 2020), and embedded ethics (McLennan *et al.*, 2020).

PIM advocacy and information literacy

Tools for managing personal information are ubiquitous and essential today (i.e., they are information society services) and are provided in a wide variety of applications from different developers. Yet because most people use a small number of tools produced by the tech giants discussed above, PIM research tends to investigate and augment only those tools and their users, build plug-ins for them, and so on, which no doubt benefits, directly or indirectly, those tools and developers rather than the alternatives (Kljun *et al.*, 2015). PIM researchers could therefore aim to develop and provide users with ethical *alternatives* to the tools of the tech giants, and even play an active role in educating users about the availability and ethical importance of such alternatives. Providing such knowledge to users requires the development of new services and PIM education covering not only PIM skills but also background about tool providers and alternatives (e.g., the risks to and importance of data privacy, ethical issues with common tool providers, alternative tools and providers). Since prescriptions are rare in PIM research, events where participants share best practices are very useful, but we must also consider which information skills are necessary to prepare and convey (e.g., troubleshooting, encryption, managing *others'* information, and long-term collection management; Jones *et al.*, 2016). There is therefore a clear suitability and need for PIM skills to be integrated into information literacy initiatives; *in other words, information literacy is key to ethical PIM.*

Finally, PIM researchers can, and arguably should be advocates for ethical PIM. Within research this could mean developing open-source software (or plug-ins for such), and taking care to generalise findings and recommendations beyond the usual platforms so not only the tech giants benefit. In public outreach, this could mean PIM and LIS researchers join advocates

of rights-, privacy-, and democracy-preserving software (usually free and open-source software) in discussions about the problems of the tech giants and their popular tools, platforms, and services, for example by explicating the relevant ideas through reviews, opinion papers, blog posts, workshops (e.g., at the ASIST AM), and so on.

Conclusion

In light of the examples above one could argue that COVID-19 has helped reveal, or perhaps raised the visibility of, the growing importance of effective PIM systems provided by a variety of developers and the importance of education about PIM; ethical PIM systems and services are needed now more than ever. Developing and promoting them will require careful consideration of how to best promote ethical outcomes.

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