The Mutability of Personal Documents and Mediated Memories as We Age: A Collaborative Reflection

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BACKGROUND

All of us continually accumulate information about ourselves in our everyday lives, intentionally, incidentally, or otherwise, for self-presentation, self-fulfillment, reminders of our past, reinforcing identity, as a hobby, for personal documentation, or as evidence of one's legacy for our imagined future audience. Increasingly, this evidence is in digital form, and often in the cloud. How do our personal documentation practices change as we age, and how do we create and save personal evidence of ourselves for future generations, or for posterity? Even when we do, will our family and others be interested in them or understand the context of these documents? This essay explores answers to the above questions through collaborative reflection and explores how aging affects our personal documentation practices and how the meaning and purpose of these practices (and the documents themselves) change as our priorities and abilities change.

PERSONAL DOCUMENTS

"We're an information economy. They teach you that in school. What they don't tell you is that it's impossible to move, to live, to operate at any level without leaving traces, bits, and seemingly meaningless fragments of personal information. Fragments that can be retrieved, amplified..." - William Gibson, *Johnny Mnemonic*

Personal documentation can include oral histories, diaries, letters, narratives incorporating photovoice, online social networks, and other reflective and lifelogging techniques that allow us to record our everyday stories, increasingly using digital technologies. For many of us, our personal documentation is scattered across different

workplaces, homes, and even across countries, not to mention across several online platforms and on obsolete devices.

Documents, along with some objects and artifacts that act as documents, do not actually hold our memories but are agents that can cue our memories through physical or digital experiences or through a combination of both, experienced through our senses. Some objects can cue memories (such as photos, a memento, or a crocheted coaster), or trigger a told memory. The story is then (re)constructed through our remembered knowledge and told memories. These can be defined as "oral documents" (Turner, 2007) that can be reproduced, where orality is representative of thought and memory, which is inherently social (Turner, 2007). In our paper about family information (Narayan, Zijlema, Reyes, & Kennan, 2024), we found that spoken history was one of the most important ways of passing on our autobiographical memories and family stories. Just as documents furnish evidence, so too does orality in both the action and content required to produce it (Turner, 2007). In fact, after posing the question, "What are documents?" Levy (2001) goes on to answer that "they are, quite simply, talking things. They are bits of the material world – clay, stone, animal skin, plant fiber, sand – that we've imbued with the ability to speak" (Levy, 2001, p. 23). However, that is not what documents are primarily about, for "documents are made to carry and offer up very particular kinds of stories and in very particular kinds of ways." (Levy, 2001, p. 30); they represent and communicate information. Kierney (2001) adds that "only when haphazard happenings are transformed into a story, and thus made memorable over time, that we become full agents of our history" (p. 4). However, tracking the past is not the critical function of such autobiographical remembering. Remembering also plays important and heavily context-sensitive roles in maintaining and renegotiating self-narratives, promoting social relations, and directing future action (Bluck et al. 2005)

The personal documents accompanying us through life are evolving, living documents, some of which (photo albums, family recipes, diaries, etc.) are passed onto future generations. Others, like the legal documents used as evidence of ourselves, such as passports, expire with us. According to Lund (2004), documents have aspects that are informational (mental), material (physical), and communicational (social). All three dimensions—the social environment (the communication), the mental configurations (the information), and the physical or gestural document itself (documentation) —need to come together for something to be meaningful as a document (Lund, 2024). Thus, a document is always the result of a complementary process of documentation, communication, and information (Lund, 2024, p. 15).

IMMUTABLE MOBILES?

"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*

A document is often considered an "immutable mobile" or possesses "the properties of being mobile but also immutable, presentable, readable and combinable with one another." (Latour, 1986, p.7); in other words, something that is stable and unchanging, with a mobility aspect, or an ability to be portable. Their materiality may change, but they have a fixity in that their content is supposed to remain the same over time and provide stable evidence. In this classical view of a document, it is not "re-constructed" every time we access it, as is the case with memories. However, Levy (2001) argues that all documents (including paper documents) – are simultaneously "static *and* changing, fixed *and* fluid," but that the main point is that they have "communicative stability" or the "ability to keep talk fixed, to guarantee its repeatability through a stable, external form that allows it to be shared, to be held in common" (Levy, 2001, p. 36-37).

Different generations often have varying priorities shaped by their unique experiences and societal contexts. As people age, both their physical and mental processes undergo significant changes. The concept of "immutability" in documents is traditionally associated with their stability and unchangeability. However, oral storytelling and the transmission of information within families exemplify the "mutability" aspect, as these forms of documentation are inherently adaptable and dynamic. Despite their ephemeral nature, they serve as vital records of cultural and familial history. "The digital world too, pulls against immutability, while simultaneously adding a layer of confusion…with digital, while transportation and mobility are enhanced, immutability is diminished" (Brown & Duguid, 2002, p. 184).

By considering the mutability of people and documents, we can better appreciate the dynamic nature of information and its transmission across generations. This perspective encourages a more inclusive understanding of what constitutes a document, recognizing the importance of structure and stability in preserving and communicating information, knowledge, and, eventually, some understanding of ourselves and our histories in a meaningful way.

MUTABLE MEMORIES

"Memories, like misfiled documents, are not always where you expect to find them...I learned that detailed questions often did little to trigger specific memories. People returned to distant facts in roundabout ways, along their own winding paths, which seemed more mapped by emotion than by logic."

— Ariana Neumann, *When Time Stopped: A Memoir of My Father's War and What Remains*

All of us continually make sense of our personal and family histories as we age so that what we leave behind contributes to our family and cultural memory rather than being just a collection of incomprehensible digital objects or unexplained material artifacts stored away in a box under the bed. To understand the difference between objects and objects that contribute to remembering our past, we must distinguish between documents, personal memories (autobiographical memory) and how objects can act as cues to memory. According to Staats (2019, xiii), we "primarily make sense of the past through the materiality of things — through objects, artifacts, landscapes, and [our] bodies."

While documents, such as photos, can be essential memory keepsakes, these documents themselves are not what we consider memories. Personal documents and objects can act as cues in our autobiographical memory system, which is the basis of personal memories. According to the Self-Memory-System model by Conway and colleagues (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Conway & Loveday, 2015), autobiographical knowledge and episodic memories are activated, constructing a memory. For example, a wedding photo of a married couple may activate vivid memories for the couple on their wedding day and evoke warm emotions. However, it may just be viewed as a random photo of two wed people for another person. Memories and the process of remembering are dynamic constructs that may change as we live and age. A divorce may change the memories associated with the wedding photo, and mental decline, such as dementia, may disrupt our access to memories and alter our reminiscing processes.

The advent of digital technologies has significantly transformed our relationship with personal documentation and memories. Digital platforms enable us to document and share our lives faster and more widely than ever before. This shift has profound implications for how we perceive and interact with our personal memories. As Van Dijck (2007, p. 52) notes, "personal cultural memory is coming out of the shoebox and becoming part of a global digital culture—a wireless world that appears dense with invisible threads connecting mind, matter, and imagination." Although digitisation changes memory forms, these inform what it is that we remember. "Digital forms, although not superseding analogue memory forms, transform how the past is remembered" (Van Dijck, 2007, p. 49).

This transition from physical to digital documentation also allows for greater accessibility and connectivity, making personal stories part of a larger, interconnected digital narrative. However, it also raises questions about privacy, ownership, and the seeming permanence of digital records. In this context, the mutability of digital documents—how they can be easily edited, shared, and sometimes lost—adds a new layer of complexity to our understanding of personal documentation. This evolving landscape challenges us to

rethink what it means for something to be a document and how we preserve and value our personal histories in a digital age.

REFLECTIONS

We drew on our personal experiences in order to write this paper collaboratively, each contributing our unique personal narratives, reflections, and observations using a relational approach. By doing so, we were able to construct a shared understanding of our topic. We reflect on how we can make sense of our own personal and family histories in a holistic manner as we age so that what we leave behind contributes to our family and cultural memory and is not just a data store of indecipherable digital objects or an underbed shoe box of unexplained material artifacts. We explored the challenges of dealing with the wide distribution of personal digital information fragmented through different mediums. Like time, our personal spaces of information are constantly expanding and also evolving; attention, control, and ownership are some of the issues at hand, as well as benign neglect and the fragility of human memory.

Vanessa

There is an intricate relationship between aging, documentation, and memories. I have noted its impact on my personal archives, which has been profound, especially as I age, and I realize that my priorities have changed over the years. I am now reliving in my mind, moments that I once thought were trivial, that have since become cherished memories. The earlier parts of my life are documented physically through photos and childhood physical mementos. As I reflect on their tangible nature, these items hold a certain charm, which makes me think of how older generations in my family still rely on physical memories. Quite the opposite for me, for as I age, I have been leaning more towards digital mediums. What has made me gravitate towards that shift? I start by asking myself when it all started for me.

I was in my late 20s when blogs and social media platforms began to thrive as a one-stop shop to connect, create, and document memories. Now in my late 30s, I am influenced by the societal shift to create, access, and maintain my personal histories digitally; in fact, many of them are now born-digital. I have witnessed my personal narrative unfold in different formats over time, and it has led me to think about how these technological developments have affected the kinds of memories that are deemed worthy of documenting. I also wonder how I came to use these digital methods. I can't be the only one.

Much like myself, the world is shifting to transform their narratives to exist in digital spaces. What does this look like for older adults? Do they also feel a need to follow the

digital shift? This is quite difficult to answer when older adults often experience uncertainty about their continued access to digital technologies. While some aging adults can access personal digital tools, how do they feel when accessing their digital content from cloud storage applications?

I do feel distrustful when using apps like cloud storage and social media platforms to document my life, although I rely on the immediacy and accessibility of these digital tools. I gravitate toward convenience. I appreciate the search functions and tagging that come with these tools, which allow me to find, organize, and manage memories more easily than before. Still, I do not trust these spaces to be the sole holders of my digital memories. I need to keep these precious digital artifacts backed up in other spaces like my cell phone's expandable drive and my computer's external hard drive.

However, as technology evolves, we face challenges. I have experienced older formats becoming obsolete and new tools with steeper learning curves. The crux is to manage to balance between preserving my memories and adapting to new technologies, all while we ourselves are aging. As if we were not going through enough physiological changes, our memories too, are transforming as we age; what I thought to save long ago, seems meaningless now, and what I'm looking for to revive a memory can't be found in my personal archives, thus fading away over time. I have considered a hybrid approach where I maintain some physical archives regularly and back up my digital ones, but balancing the physical and digital documentation can be tricky. On the one hand, keeping both types of archives might seem like the perfect compromise; I can get the best of both worlds: tangible items to cherish and the ease of digital access. But, let's face it, maintaining two systems can be challenging. It is like the saying, " to have one foot in the past, and neither in the future." There will be a constant need to update digital files while preserving physical items, which could lead to inconsistencies and overlooked memories. The convenience of keeping my digital memories might be overshadowed by the challenge of transitioning between old and new technologies. It is a counterintuitive process. So, while I want to consider hybrid archives as I age, it will require careful planning and a willingness to adapt, and as I get older, I seem to seek comfort rather than adaptation.

Bhuva

In my 20s, I used to have a somewhat photogenic memory for book covers, book placements on shelves, and also for documents, numbers, and text. Nowadays, I have a hard time remembering the author's name or the book title even when I remember the "aboutness" of a book. I have realized that the key to keeping my memory alive about the contents of my own considerable book collection is to keep them close and look at them

often, even if I don't actually pick them up or read them again. The 'materiality' of the book helps me remember it. This also means that I don't remember things that I 'read' on Kindle or PDFs etc. However, I do remember things I heard (on Audible or other audio) to some extent.

As my family's self-selected archivist, I am responsible for not just my own records and information, and the associated memory-making, but also of those in my parents' generation, as many elders in my family are suffering from dementia and cannot contextualize much of the the documents or artifacts in their possession anymore.

As an academic, my life is increasingly busy, and almost everything needs to go on my Outlook calendar, or I forget it. It is a pity that even reminders to call my mum or meet with friends now have to fit within a time slot on my Outlook calendar - one way that organizational calendaring has colonized my personal life. These calendar entries are color-coded by categories as a way of giving me information at a glance, but now my calendar looks like a Christmas tree.

My biggest challenge is my to-do list. I used to make them in a notebook long ago, but have been making them on 'Stickies' on my Mac for over ten years. However, so many things get on it that I can hardly keep up, so there are sub-lists and categories, and the urgent ones get on real sticky notes and go on my wall in front of me in my bedroom so I remember when I wake up. To have these cognitive artifacts (or documentary fragments and surrogates) all around me is a bit sad, but without them, I can hardly complete even a day at my job. In summary, it is the tactile material tools (and not digital ones) that now help me remember and retain information as I get older.

For a global gypsy like myself, my personal information management is necessarily tactile and document based, for very few governments accept digital documents or digital proof for anything. As Buckland (2017) says " My passport is more powerful than I am, because I cannot cross frontiers without it, but it could cross them without me" (p. 6). Over thirty years ago, when I applied for a Green Card in the USA, I didn't have my birth certificate, so I had to call an uncle in India who went to the hospital where I was born, and paid someone to dig up the birth records and make a 'True Copy' of it – the doctor who had delivered me was still working there at the time; she had also delivered every other person in my immediate family.

As an academic, my personal and work contexts are more intertwingled than normal, so the challenges related to my information at the university or research are similar to those I have at home. However, in my personal documentation, I can stick to what works for me, but at work, I have learnt to adjust to the several changes that are imposed on us,

from Teams to OneDrive to Sharepoint to G-Drives to CloudStore to Google Drive. Sometimes it's hard to remember where to look for something. Someday, "we will find ourselves and our hard drives so packed with data that we will be at a loss to make any sense from it" (Zalinger et. al, 2009). What then, will the next generation in my family make of my digital inheritance which now includes digitized documents of their material heritage?

Annemarie

In a longitudinal study that I conducted on cued remembering with personal possessions, I investigated the mutability of the cued memories and objects (Zijlema, 2018). While not for all investigated samples, it turned out that the possession cued (also) other memories or that associated emotions and feelings had changed.

There are several possessions I own that have been passed down from my family, or that remind me of my family. I have not kept a record on what memories I associate with these possessions, but I am certain that these cued memories also changed over time. For example, a hand-made crocheted coaster given by my grandmother was a bit of an unwanted present at the time it was gifted, as it did not fit in the decoration style of my preference. While the latter is still the case, it is appreciated now as a reminder of a family member I loved, and I can picture her in my head with a crochet project or two on the armchair.

While the above objects rely on the memories associated, there are also tangible documents about family events that I did not experience myself, where I learn new things about my family's past. For example, my family produced a family magazine from 1996 to 2023, in which stories from the past and recent updates and experiences were shared by aunts, uncles, cousins, and later nieces and nephews too. With a family of more than 100 members, this provided a medium to learn about each other and share stories and photos that may otherwise not be shared. After my grandmother passed away, excerpts from her diary were also printed in the magazine. In addition, recently my aunts and uncles each wrote a chapter about their memories of their childhood, which is self-printed as a book. These examples are recorded accounts of family members' memories at the moment of writing.

With the stories that I did not experience first-hand, I have been able to learn about my family's past. While I was not present during their childhood, I can imagine how the described events happened. I would make assumptions and fill in gaps using knowledge from other experiences, such as knowing how the town they grew up in looks like, or knowing how my grandmother was. With my uncles and aunts ageing (the majority now being over 80 years old) and other family members not documenting or sharing as much,

the growth of this knowledge base is slowly coming to a standstill. Nevertheless, I feel fortunate with such a wealth of documentation available on my family's past.

Mary Anne

In my semi-retirement I gather photographs, objects, writing from my parents and extended family, and other information. I document these information/memories, from the "important", such as birth certificates, family history, genealogies, and memoirs, to the "trivial", for example, photograph albums of my travels, a book of family recipes. Initially this documentation is for my own information, for communication with myself. Some of this documentation is in physical form, some recorded electronically and then printed. Some remains only in electronic form via social media applications such as Facebook and Instagram, for example my lockdown recreations and photographing of my parents' recipes. As I get older I am more conscious that though these communications of information are meaningful mainly to me, they are not necessarily meaningful to others. I would like these documents to have a social life, but my children, busy establishing their own lives and bringing up their own children, and other family and friends are not always interested. They do not have the cognitive, or mental, space to engage. Learning about, and understanding and knowledge of, their forebears is not high on their agenda. My documents may just disappear when I die, to the physical dump or into the ether. What is meaningful to me, may not be to my children or grandchildren or to the world beyond my family. In that case it may just be easier for them to dispose of all this documentation – in their eyes, just "junk". In this case it means that my family documents are not immutable, as documents curated in a formal archive may be.

That mutability of documents does not just occur in the family or private sphere. While I feel sad about the potential "junking" of my personal documents, I also see that sadness writ large on the faces of several retired library, information, and documentation scholar colleagues who have been unable to find libraries which, or family members who, will take their carefully curated, extensive, and sometimes rare collections of documents. Some have sold or even dumped them themselves as they move into smaller homes or residential care.

Then I ask, with all this loss, what of the library and social historians of the future? Will future generations be as interested in the past as I am? I can only imagine so. The soldiers who wrote letters home during various conflicts, which are now stored in libraries and treasured by social and family historians for their insights about a past that may help us understand it and plan our collective future may not have conceived of these documents having any value, but they do. Such documents are now most likely not written on paper, but via email, social media or other less persistent, more mutable digital media, which may simply disappear. Or even if on more lasting media the information within them may

be mutable, either lacking interpretation from their creator or not being valued by those who come after us. How do we know what documents will become authoritative and have a life beyond our own – in society or even just within our own families?

DISCUSSION

Without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future. - Elie Wiesel

Drawing from Mitchell and Egudo's (2003) insights, we sought to harness the theoretical power of storytelling. Our mutual sharing and listening process uncovered a comprehensive perspective on how aging influences personal documentation practices and our memories regarding information.

Despite being of four different decades, each of us had similar challenges around documenting evidence of ourselves and our families, especially as we are all between two very different generations: one that we have inherited a lot from in terms of tangible documentation and information in the form of stories, and the one that we anticipate will value their inheritance we will soon pass on, much of it digitally.

This essay explored the intricate challenges of navigating the vast expanse of personal information dispersed across multiple formats. Much like the fluid passage of time, our personal information landscape is in constant flux, giving rise to complex issues of control, ownership, benign neglect, and accountability in managing personal documents and histories. "Documents quickly pass beyond the reach and protection of their maker and have to fend for themselves. A central challenge, then, is to engage the interests of the community they are intended for. As the number of documents multiplies dramatically and their reach is extended by information technology, the challenge of engaging an intended audience grows too." (Brown & Duguid, 1996).

Moreover, when every moment of our life is logged in some way and documented voluntarily or involuntarily, it becomes a meaningless and uninteresting document to others who cannot see the structure or the story behind it. According to Brown & Duguid (2002), "books and paper documents set a useful precedent not only for document design but for information technology design in general. In a time of abundant and even superabundant raw information, they suggest that the better path in creating social documents (and social communities) lies not in the direction of increasing amounts of information and increasingly full representation but rather in leaving increasing amounts un- or underrepresented" (p. 191). Just as a map of the Earth on a 1:1 map scale is not of any use to anyone in the world, a vast data store of documents and information about ourselves is of no use to our kin. Therefore, we must cull and curate the accumulated

detritus of our lives while communicating our narrative identity and stories in a structured manner well before the ravages of aging change our physical and cognitive priorities. This type of mnemonic labor involves much emotional work, but this labor of remembering contributes to our cultural capital and to our families' imaginings of their own future.

Entrusting our histories to others without the contextual stories that accompany them may result in a significant loss of cultural heritage and life stories for the next generation. We recognize that this endeavor demands considerable effort from individuals to structure and curate their personal information using their heads, hands, and hearts. Our reflection will encourage others to reflect on their own personal documentation and memory-keeping and communication practices amidst the challenges posed by digital documentation tools in preserving the story of our lives.

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