Type of Contribution: PAPER

User's experience and habits in organization and preservation of personal digital legacy

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Keywords: digital legacy, organization of digital content, digital legacy management

Introduction

The development of the Internet and modern technology has led to profound changes in the everyday life of the general population. The amount of time an average Internet user spends online is constantly rising. In consequence, the amount of content created is constantly growing. The digital content that users create over their lifetime can become a part of their own digital legacy, so it is necessary to organize it and preserve it for the future.

Theoretical framework

Considerable part of our professional and private life nowadays takes place in digital environment. In today's world, an individual possesses two identities: a real-world identity confirmed by official paper documentation and a digital identity created by using the Internet (Park, 2017). Every interaction with information systems results in leaving behind a trail of data in the virtual space. It is called a digital footprint or digital shadow. A digital footprint represents an individual's online presence, provides evidence of their digital and physical identity and records the data left by their interaction in a digital environment (Fish, 2009). As defined by Arakerimath and Gupta (2015), digital footprint is all data left behind by users of digital services; anything they directly or indirectly share online. According to their explanation, a digital footprint is created as the sum of the content that the user itself publishes online (comments, likes, image sharing, etc.), content that others publish about the user (image tags, hashtags, etc.), and data collected by certain digital services (IP address, location, etc.) (Arakerimath and Gupta, 2015).

The continuous development of technology and digital society has also necessitated the change in the understanding of personal property as such and shaped a new form of property – digital property, also termed digital assets. As Rachel Pinch (2014) states, there is no universally accepted definition of the term digital asset, but it can consist of websites, domain names, photos, electronic accounts, and other assets that exist only in digital form. However, as the digital world is constantly evolving, it is very difficult to determine what falls under a one's digital assets. It can

include photos, online banking and investment account statements, email records and associated passwords, and various social media accounts, as well as personal digital files, audio and video files, medical records and financial or legal documents. The sum of all digital assets a person owns constitutes their digital estate. Nonetheless, it is obvious a personal legacy no longer consists of material things only, but also of the content and data created in the virtual world. Digital legacy, in its simplest form, is a sum of the digital assets a person leaves to others; it can be distributed the same as material assets, that is, can be left to one or more heirs (Carrol and Romano, 2011).

According to Brubaker et al. (2014), there are two common understandings of the digital legacy: one is all that is left to other people, the other is the permanent representation of an individual after his death. Bellamy et al. (2013) state that our personally created digital legacies typically include: email accounts, social media content created for example on Facebook or LinkedIn etc., music accounts on services such as iTunes and Spotify, photos on platforms like Flickr or Instagram, videos on YouTube or similar services, and various documents on cloud storage services such as Dropbox. The same paper notes how, in parallel, distributed and diverse records are being gathered across hundreds of internet sites by default, as our digital inputs and outputs are routinely captured, stored and mined with personal data being used for marketing purposes. In both ways, during our daily life, we gather a significant volume of the digital legacy.

Research questions

The aim of this research is to determine the opinions and attitudes of an average Internet users (in this study: respondents) about their own personal digital legacy. Another aim of this research is to examine in what way and to what extent users organize their personal digital content for the future. The purpose of this research is to raise awareness about the importance of organizing digital content and preserving one's personal digital legacy.

The research aims:

1. To determine whether the respondents are aware of their own personal digital legacy and to give insight into their opinions and attitudes about the subject.
2. To determine in what way and to what extent the respondents organize and preserve their personal digital legacy.

Methodology

An online survey was used as a research method, created on Google forms. The questionnaire consisted of 34 questions: 32 closed-type questions and 2 open-type questions. The survey questions were divided into three parts: general information about participants, creation of digital content and opinions and attitudes about digital legacy as well as actions and habits in practice. Answers were collected in the period from February 25th to March 7th, 2022.

The sample consists of 229 respondents. The survey was completed by 227 out of 229 respondents (99.13%), but all the answers were included in the analysis, given that the level of completion was satisfactory.

Research Results & Discussion

The results of the survey show the respondents' opinions and attitudes towards the process of the organization and preservation of their own digital content and digital legacy, as well as their actions and habits in practice. Different age groups were included, with participants ranging from 18 to 61 years old, as well as various educational backgrounds and professions. However, significantly more female respondents (80%) took part in the research, and only 2.2% of respondents were over 55 years of age.

The results indicate that respondents do create a large amount of digital content. Communication accounts (93.4%), social networks (86.9%), e-mail (85.6%), the internet or mobile banking (80.3%), and entertainment and streaming accounts (76.9%) are used the most, while other types of platforms are used to a slightly lesser extent on average. Expectedly, considering current trends, the most popular social networking platforms among the participants are Facebook (used by 85.2% of respondents) and Instagram (used by 74.2% of respondents). Many respondents use their Facebook or Google account to log into third-party accounts, thus linking their user accounts with several other platforms. Majority of respondents (63.3%) also use at least one of the cloud storage platforms, most often for storing digital photographs. The frequency of using the certain online platforms certainly affects the amount of content generated there. The results of this part of the research confirm that users create a substantial amount of digital content on various online platforms. However, it is evident that respondents generally do not recognize the value of digital content as a potential legacy, nor the importance of posthumous management of their own digital legacy, considering only 4.8% of the participants made some plans or actions for preserving it.

The results showed that not many respondents are familiar with the built-in functions some platforms like Google and Facebook offer for the posthumous organization and preservation of digital content, nor with the other online or offline tools or services purposed for digital legacy management. In addition, vast majority of the participants either would not include digital content nor the instructions for managing it in their will or never even thought about it, as seen in Figure 1.

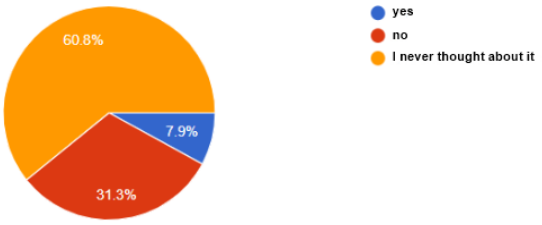

Figure 1: User’s opinion on including digital content and instruction on managing it in their will

In conclusion, although some respondents are familiar with the concept of digital legacy and have already taken some actions regarding posthumous management of their personal digital legacy, majority of participants are still not aware of the importance of it and they do not take necessary steps for organization and preservation. Nevertheless, participation in this research has led a large number of participants to think about this problem and even take some actions, which partially fulfilled the purpose of this research.

Conclusion

This research tested three hypotheses which were proven correct and can serve as a general conclusion to the research.

1. It has been confirmed that the majority of respondents from the sample are not familiar with the built-in functions on the online platforms provided for the posthumous organization of digital content, and they do not use them (e.g., in Google of Facebook).
2. It has been confirmed that the majority of respondents from the sample are not familiar with available services and tools purposed for the posthumous organization and preservation of the personal digital legacy and they do not use them.
3. It has been confirmed that although the respondents in this study are not aware of their own digital legacy and do not take the necessary actions to preserve it, they are in favour of taking some measures to preserve it in future.

Furthermore, this research answered both research questions. It can be said that the average internet user is not aware of the significance of the personal digital legacy and the value it can have for potential heirs. Generally, no one is taking active, necessary measures and actions for preserving their digital content so it can become the part of their personal digital legacy. It is paramount to raise awareness about digital legacy management and preservation because it not only has sentimental and occasionally even financial value for the heirs, but also has a wider social and cultural value for the future and in this sense should be preserved as a part of the cultural heritage.

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