

# How is information personal?

William Jones

The Information School  
University of Washington  
williamj@u.washington.edu

## ABSTRACT

There are at least six senses in which information can be said to be personal. Information can be: 1. Controlled by or owned by us. 2. About us. 3. Directed towards us. 4. Sent (posted, provided) by us. 5. (Already) experienced by us. 6. Relevant (useful) to us. Each sense provides an important perspective for discussions of PIM. Senses of the personal in our information can form a yardstick by which to evaluate supporting tools, organizing schemes and overall strategies in a practice of PIM.

## Author Keywords

Personal information management, evaluation

## ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

## INTRODUCTION

What does it mean for information to be personal? Is personal information the information that, at least nominally, is under our control? Or should personal information also include information that we have experienced – whether or not under our control? What about information about us that's controlled by others such as credit agencies and insurance companies? And should we also include information directed at or relevant to us even if the information hasn't yet been experienced?

The position taken in this paper is that the definition of “personal information” needs to be inclusive. We relate to information in several ways. Each is personal. Each kind of information is relevant to a discussion of PIM. As is summarized in Table 1 and elaborated below, information can be owned by, about, directed towards, sent by, experienced by or relevant to “me”.

1. **Controlled by (owned by) me.** The information a person keeps, directly or indirectly (e.g., via software applications), for personal use is personal information.

Included are email messages in an email account, files on the hard drive of a personal computer and also the papers kept on surfaces and inside conventional filing cabinets. Although information is, at least nominally, under the person's control, the rights of ownership for portions of this information are sometimes in dispute. In the context of a person's work inside a company or in collaboration with others, for example, it is often unclear who owns what information.

2. **About me.** Information about a person but available to and possibly under the control of others is personal information. Personal information in this category includes the information about a person kept by doctors and health organizations, for example, or the information kept by tax agencies and credit bureaus.
3. **Directed towards me.** Included in this category is the email that arrives in the inbox and also the pop-up notifications that this new email has arrived. Alerts raised by a person's computer, the “push” of advertisements on a visited web page or the television or the radio, and the ringing telephone are all examples of information directed towards a person. The information itself may or may not be personally relevant. But the intended impacts of directed information certainly are personal. For better or worse, information directed to a person can distract the person from a current task, consume a person's attention and convince the person to spend time, spend money, change an opinion or take an action.
4. **Sent (posted, provided) by me.** Information sent by the person (or posted, published) is personal information. We often try to control, albeit imperfectly, who sees what and when for the information we send, post or otherwise provide. We do this with email, for example, through distribution lists and notices on the email messages such as “Confidential, please do not distribute”. Or we may hide information on a disconnected web page and then selectively distribute the address to this web page.
5. **Experienced by me.** Information experienced by a person is also personal information. Some of this information is under the person's control and so also personal in the first sense of personal. Other information is not under the person's control: The book

a person browses (but puts back) in a traditional library, for example, or the pages a person views on the Web. This fifth sense of personal information is especially important since we rarely consume all of an item's information in one or even several readings. Over a period of time we may return to an information item – a document, a Web page or even an email message – several different times. One major challenge of PIM is to support re-finding – the return to information previously experienced.

6. **Relevant (useful) to me.** A final sense in which information can be personal is determined by whether this information relevant or useful to us. This category cuts across others to include subsets of the information we control, information we've experienced before and also new information we've never seen before. Out there, somewhere, is an article that is perfect for a report we're writing or an advertisement for a vacation package that perfectly fits our needs. This final sense of personal information can be expanded to include information that we would or our family would find offensive and that we definitely would *not* want to see. As noted in the conclusion to Chapter 1, "thar be dragons" out there – especially if we surf the web but even in the junk mail of our inbox. With respect to this expanded "sixth sense" of personal, we depend upon filters both to filter in the information we'd like to see and to filter out the information we do not want to see.

The categories of personal information in Table 1 are broad and distinctions between categories can quickly blur. Categories have value not for what they exclude – in their union, they exclude very little. Rather, categories, each in their turn, provide a useful focal point for discussions of PIM-related issues, supporting tools and enabling technologies. For example, each sense of personal yields a distinct sense of what it means to personalize search as illustrated in Table 2.

The six senses of personal can similarly be used as a yardstick to assess other tools and technologies for the ways -- good and bad -- that these impact our practices of PIM. We can also apply this yardstick to schemes of organization and overall strategies of PIM. "don't know/doesn't apply" answers are fine. But asking questions for each sense of personal may produce unexpected answers.

For example, some people in a workplace have a strategy of keeping very little information under their control. Instead they depend on their colleagues to supplement what they are able to remember or to retrieve from the intranet. Such a strategy obviously depends upon the good will of colleagues who may come to resent repeated inquiries of the form "can you forward that email thread?" or "Do you have a current copy of the report?"

One additional drawback is made more apparent as we cycle through the senses of personal information impacted by such an "ask others" strategy. People who adopt such a

strategy, even as they ask their colleagues for information, are providing a great deal of information about themselves – their interests, the projects they are working on, their progress in completing these projects.

	Relation to "me"	Examples	Issues
1	Controlled by, owned by me	Messages in our email accounts; files on our hard drives	Security against break-ins or theft, backups, virus protection, etc.
2	About me	Credit & medical information, tax records., histories of Web browsing & library checkouts.	Who sees what when (under which circumstances)? How is information corrected or updated?
3	Directed to me	Phone calls, drop-ins, TV ads, web ads, pop-ups.	Protection of us and our money, energy, attention and time.
4	Sent (posted, provided) by me	Email, blogs, personal web sites, published reports and articles.	Who sees what when? Did the message get through?
5	(Already) experienced by me	Email that we've read, web pages we've browsed, billboards we've seen...	How to get back to information again later? Are we getting a "balanced diet" of information?
6	Relevant (useful) to me	Somewhere "out there" is the perfect vacation, house, job, life-long mate. If only I could find the right information!	If only we knew (had some idea of) what we don't know. How to filter out or otherwise avoid information we don't wish to see? (How to do likewise for our children?)
<b>Table 1. The senses of personal information.</b>			

#### Defining a personal space of information

Add all of the information that is personal to us one or another sense and each of us has a unique personal space of information or PSI as depicted in Figure 1. We inhabit this space as surely as we inhabit a physical space. Our informational space affects the way we view and interact with the world(s) we inhabit. Our space of information also

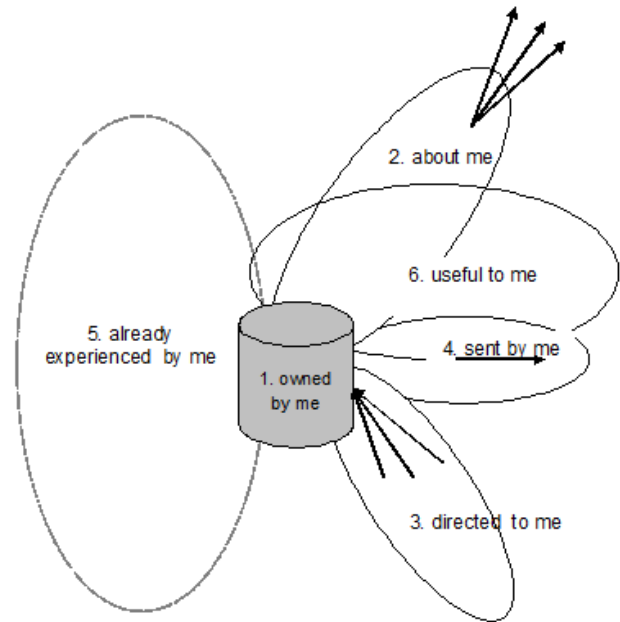
affects the way we are seen, categorized and treated by others.

	Relation to "me"	Current search support	Getting personal more
1	Controlled by, owned by me	Desktop search facilities	Suggest places to keep an item, suggest items to be archived. Identify versions of the same item.
2	About me	"Self-googling" on the Web.	Agents to alert when information about us is, accessed, transferred, modified.
3	Directed to me	Junk email filters. Rules and alerts.	Filters on <i>all</i> digital input channels that learn from usage patterns.
4	Sent (posted, provided) by me		Search to track where information we send/post/publish goes and how it's used.
5	(Already) experienced by me	Integrated desktop & web searches.	Re-finding items no matter which device they are on.
6	Relevant (useful) to me	Content Web filters block access to offensive web pages. Agents to send updates	Queries expressing persistent interests are derived from and anchored to topic folders.

**Table 2. The six senses of personal can categorize current applications of search and suggest new ones.**

The PSI might be visualized as a vast sea of personal information. If the "home waters" represent information under the person's control, then, farther out in the PSI, are waters of information that are shared, disputed or under exploration. This area includes information about the person, the use of which the person might like to control (or at least monitor) but which is currently under the control of others (credit agencies, tax authorities, insurance companies, etc.). At the periphery of a person's PSI are

oceans of available information (on the Web, corporate intranets, public libraries, etc.) only the tiniest fractions of which the person explores in order to complete various tasks and projects and in order to fulfill various roles in the person's life.



**Figure 1. A personal space of information (PSI) contains information that is personal (in any of six senses).**

Even in home waters of the PSI a person's sense of control over information is partly illusory. For example, an email message can be deleted and no longer appear. However, the message is very likely still in existence (as some figures in the public eye have learned to their chagrin). We're adrift in a sea of information. Our own personal spaces of information (PSI) are large, mostly unexplored, with uncertain boundaries and large overlap (with the PSIs of other people, organizations, etc.).

But PIM is about extending our control or at least our influence out over this sea of personal information. We will never have perfect control. We can't even hope to be aware of, let alone have influence over, much of the information that is personal to is in one or another sense – especially information of relevance to us or about us. We do what we can. And most of us can do much more than we're doing now.