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Information places: myth, affect, and gaps in information retrieval modelling

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Abstract

Introduction. This article contributes to theory building for information theory through a critical-historical approach to the ancient Simonides story, a foundational myth of human memory. By examining the Simonides myth, which details orality-based memory practices, the study identifies underemphasized aspects of memory in the social transitions to literacy.

Method. A critical-historical approach is used to examine the contemporary relevance of this influential memory myth in relation to information theory research and emerging technologies.

Analysis. The analysis highlights how users' affective and contextual experiences provide valuable information for designing information systems that deliver more precise and relevant results.

Results. The article argues that modeling the context of a user's affective experience enhances the effectiveness of information systems. It introduces and refines key concepts, including informational economy, judgement, symbol-affect, and informational alibi.

Conclusions. The author suggests further refinement and application of the concepts of informational economy, judgement, symbol-affect, and informational alibi to improve the design of information retrieval systems, emphasizing their potential to align systems more closely with embodied experience.

Introduction

Modern foundational theories in Information Retrieval (IR), predominantly based on three theoretical models—exact match, vector space, and probabilistic—tend to parallel the conduit model of information, which has been critiqued for its oversimplified view of information as merely transmitted rather than created or interpreted (Day, 2000). While these models provide robust frameworks for IR systems, they can overlook crucial aspects of information behaviour, notably the emotional, sensory, and tacit dimensions that significantly influence user interaction and information reception (Cox et al., 2017; Marcella et al., 2019; Nahl & Bilal, 2007). These issues have been recognized, but few alternative models have been advanced (Frohmann, 1990; Hjørland & Nissen Pedersen, 2005; Jansen & Rieh, 2010). Recognizing and naming these less studied elements of IR is essential for advancing theory and enhancing the practical toolkit of professionals in the field.

To enrich current theoretical approaches and operationalize these overlooked dimensions, this research revisits an ancient narrative: the myth of Simonides. This myth, influential in shaping historical and modern conceptions of memory and information behaviour (Yates, 1966), recorded the method of loci, a mnemonic technique often interpreted as an early model of known item-information retrieval. The method of loci involves cognitively associating information with specific physical locations within a familiar environment, such as a house or a path, allowing users to connect these spaces mentally to retrieve stored information. Despite its antiquity, the interpretation of this myth has had significant theoretical implications for both psychological models of memory and the modelling of IR systems (Yates, 1966).

Scholars have noted that the historical interpretation of the Simonides myth has frequently been condensed into overly simplistic frameworks. By reinterpreting this story, this research illuminates and defines key concepts critical for IR research, such as relevance and precision—concepts that presuppose users will recognize retrieval results as relevant they resemble previously known ideas. These assumptions underpin many IR techniques but do not encompass the full spectrum of challenges in retrieving information. Although numerous experts in IR have acknowledged these limitations, the conceptual toolkit for IR theory remains underdeveloped (Dobreski et al., 2021), at least in terms of pedagogy and practice. By reinterpreting the Simonides myth, this study highlights concepts that are pivotal for understanding human memory and, consequently can be usefully deployed for designing more effective information retrieval systems with similar models. Although speculative, this analysis encourages ongoing development of IR theory that integrates these richer, more nuanced dimensions of information behaviour. More specifically, it introduces four conceptual ideas that refine existing IR scholarship: economy, judgement, symbol-affect, and informational alibi.

Method

To make its argument, this study uses a conceptual approach to reinterpret the myth of Simonides in relation to modern information retrieval systems, specifically focusing on the integration of affect and community relationships. By doing so, it draws from approaches to information systems that understand users from communal perspectives rather than psychological ones (Star, 1989). This research scrutinizes classical texts and their commentaries to uncover how the ancient mnemonic practices can inform current IR technologies. It's critical reading is primarily driven by affect theory, which encourages a hermeneutical approach that focuses on the movement of bodies and sensations instead of overemphasizing text and information (Ahmed, 2004; Ahmed et al., 2009). This reading is similar to previous hermeneutical approaches in information studies that have used critical-historical approaches to revisit taken-for-granted concepts (Buckland, 1991, 1997; Day, 2000, 2011, 2014; Frohmann, 1992, 2004, 2004; Madsen, 2016). The theoretical analysis produces critical review of secondary sources that discuss Simonides' method of loci, supplemented by contemporary theories of affect and information theory. This method allows for

a nuanced understanding of the limitations and capabilities of IR in replicating the affective components of human memory and information processing. The study juxtaposes a newer interpretation of the ancient mnemonic strategies with modern IR applications to illustrate the gap between human affective memory and IR's theory.

The research data for this study consisted of primary and secondary sources related to the Simonides myth of memory, a foundational narrative in the history of information retrieval (IR). These sources highlighted the weaknesses of historical assumptions that memory operates as a stable and retrievable repository, a concept that has guided the development of IR modelling. By critically reading those texts, I traced an alternative view of memory and IR. My analysis was guided by current critiques in IR research, which highlight significant gaps in the field, particularly concerning the dynamic and contextual nature of human memory and its representation in digital systems. This combined approach enabled me to connect the myth's enduring legacy to ongoing challenges and opportunities for innovation in IR theory and practice.

In the next section, this paper describes the basic Simonides myth and points out several of its weaknesses. In the following section, I interpret secondary texts that contribute new perspectives of the Simonides myth, specifically those that identify contextual issues that would have informed early interpretations of the Simonides myth. In the last section, I offer four theoretical concepts that the myth highlights while suggesting that operationalizing those terms can help further IR research.

Analysis

Simonides of Ceos, a canonical figure among the nine canonical Greek lyric poets, lived between 556 and 468 BCE, positioning him as a precursor to classical philosophers like Socrates and Aristotle (Rawles, 2018a). He relocated from Ceos to Attica around 526 BCE, drawn by the financial prospects for his poetry. His career trajectory shifted following the assassination of his initial patron, Hipparchus, leading him to Thessaly where he gained the support of notable families like the Scopadae (Rawles, 2018b). Simonides' method of loci is exemplified in his well-documented banquet incident at the court of Scopas. Commissioned to compose an ode in honour of a boxer, Simonides included references to the Dioscuri—twin gods revered in athletic circles—which Scopas criticized as unsuitable. Subsequently, Scopas withheld payment, suggesting that Simonides seek his reward from the twins themselves. This event took a dramatic turn when, during the banquet, Simonides was called outside by two youths. In his brief absence, the banquet hall collapsed, killing all inside but leaving Simonides unharmed. The poet's subsequent role in identifying the deceased by recalling their seating positions at the table led to the development of the method of loci. The context of why Simonides was at the banquet is important for understanding his method of loci.

Ancient treatises on memory, like those by Cicero and Quintilian, often focus only on the latter part of the Simonides myth, specifically the method of loci (Cicero, 1954; Quintilian, 1922). In their rhetoric handbooks, they used this technique to distinguish between natural and artificial memory—a concept that parallels has historically informed modern information theory and subsequent IR systems, particularly those concerned with human computer interaction (Hayles, 1999). Natural memory refers to our innate cognitive abilities, while artificial memory relies on structured methods, like the method of loci, to enhance recall. This classical distinction highlights the limitations of AI in replicating the deeply contextual and emotionally nuanced processes involved in human memory and information processing. The Simonides method remains relevant today, offering insights into the complex relationship between information, user, and system—elements that remain challenging for IR systems to fully emulate. Even in modern IR, the boundary between artificial and natural memory continues to shape system design and functionality as systems are conceptualized as separate from users rather than as part of the same ecosystem (Latour, 1990; Mongili & Pellegrino, 2014). If a “natural” user is interfacing with an “artificial” system,

it is difficult to imagine IR as anything other than an exercise in precision and relevance, because the “artificial” system necessarily contains a ‘correct’ answer that a user can ideally identify. Much of the contemporary research in information studies drawing from actor-network theory approaches are advances in seeing IR as enmeshed with users (Tatnall, 2005).

Theoretical approaches similar to the method of loci has had a significant impact on 20th-century information theories, which underpin much of modern information studies, including IR (Day, 2000). Conceptually, information is difficult to pin down, largely because it’s imagined as a container for other phenomenon (Day, 2000). In practice, this has led to most studies imagining information as ‘thing’ (Buckland, 1991). Information as thing highlights mutable objects like referring to data, documents, and other physical objects that can convey knowledge. One of the reasons this thing framework is popular for developing theory is that other definitions are largely ambiguous, at least to date (Furner, 2014).

The Simonides myth and method of loci offer important perspectives for IR. Greek and Roman authors expanded upon the method of loci, introducing two critical principles that are often overlooked. First, they argued that specific words should not be associated with memory places, a theoretical technique that is intellectually similar to Salton’s vector space model that depends on specific entities and their relationships (Salton et al., 1975). Cicero and Quintilian both stressed the importance of remembering ideas or vivid images over exact words, largely because they believed as many preliterate cultures did, that words gestured toward general feelings (Rubin, 1995). Although Cicero acknowledged that the method could be used for word-for-word recall, he recommended it only for practice (Cicero, 1942, p. 2.87.357). The second principle was that memory places must be set against striking, memorable backdrops. For example, the *Rhetorica ad Herenium* advises that exceptional events like a lunar eclipse should serve as memory cues, as they evoke a stronger emotional response (Cicero, 1954, p. 3.22). Together, these principles suggest that the art of memory relies on enhancing natural memory through vivid imagery, placed in an easily recalled, unique background. Over time, these ideas have been adapted to various memory practices, from notetaking to public memory studies and cognitive theories of information behaviour.

However, contemporary interpretations of the Simonides myth have identified important limitations of the original interpretations (Rawles, 2018b). For instance, Simonides associated banquet seats with individual identities, implying that ordinary locations could serve as loci. This contradicts Cicero and Quintilian’s advice to use striking, visually rich images as memory aids. Furthermore, Simonides did not order the loci himself; the banquet seating was predetermined. This contradicts the myth’s emphasis on arranging loci in a deliberate order. The story also blurs the line between natural and artificial memory, as Simonides stumbled upon the method by accident—his recollection wasn’t a trained skill, but a consequence of the roof’s collapse. The usual interpretation of the myth lends itself to supporting precision and relevance theories, but those could also be supplemented with theoretical concepts that further develop artificial/natural as a mutually dependent concept where artificial and natural aren’t in opposition but are considered asymmetries in systems design. Moreover, the myth would highlight how important vividness is for information retrieval. One might imagine how much easier it is to search for a topic or object that is more emotionally forceful.

The Simonides myth also points to several alternative perspectives for memory due to details that have been left underexamined. These include the following questions: Why is the detail of Scopas short-changing Simonides included if the story is meant to illustrate a simple mnemonic technique? And why are Castor and Pollux invoked, despite their irrelevance to mnemonic methods? Additionally, both Cicero and Quintilian express doubts about the practical effectiveness of the method of loci, as Quintilian sceptically noted (Yates, 1966, p. 24). This raised the question that numerous historians later addressed: Cicero, Quintilian, and the model of the method of loci had been interpreted too simplistically. New scholarship has provided more nuanced readings of

Cicero and Quintilian (Leff, 1996). Cicero and Quintilian both noted that Simonides was not just the inventor of memory palaces, he was also renowned as a sophist poet with a reputation for being preoccupied with the economics of poetry. Some of the method of loci story was to provide a story about memory practices that points to Simonides as a much more elaborate theorist of information and memory. Much of his work emphasized the importance of compensation for artistic labour (Rawles, 2018b, p. 15) and his obsession with payment was so well known that he became a target for ridicule (Rawles, 2018b, pp. 138–139). Indeed, one of Simonides' contemporaries, the Greek poet Aristophanes, even used him as a symbol of greed in *Clouds*, comparing Sophocles' desire for wealth to Simonides' legendary avarice (Aristophanes, 1998, p. 690). Similarly, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* presents a dialogue where Simonides asserts that wealth is more valuable than wisdom, as the wise serve the wealthy (Aristotle, 1926, p. 1391a). This economic concern is tacit in the memory palace retellings by Cicero and Quintilian and is critical for understanding the relationship between Simonides and his patron, Scopos. Simonides, having never been paid what he was owed, is saved by divine intervention, suggesting that the gods compensated him instead.

The inclusion of Castor and Pollux in the myth offers another clue to the economic themes underlying the story. Quintilian notes that the involvement of the Dioscuri is likely fictional, yet their presence is significant. Both Cicero and Quintilian introduce Castor and Pollux when the topic of payment arises: first when Scopos refuses to pay Simonides, and again when the twins save the poet, symbolically '*paying their debt*'. Beyond narrative allusion, there is historical evidence linking the Dioscuri to money. The first Roman denarius, minted centuries after Simonides, depicted Castor and Pollux on horseback (Meadows & Williams, 2001, p. 38). While Simonides would not have known this Roman coinage, the association of the twins with money could have developed over time, transforming the memory and economic themes in popular retellings of the story.

A deeper analysis suggests that Simonides' callers—allegedly the Dioscuri—were not mythical gods but metaphorical symbols for something more worldly important for the method of loci. Neither Cicero nor Quintilian provides an alternate explanation for why Simonides left the banquet hall just before the roof collapsed. The coincidence of Simonides' timely departure is usually interpreted as divine intervention or the result of shoddy architecture. However, if Castor and Pollux represent money, they may point to a different cause for the massacre. Simonides, an unpaid poet and the sole survivor, may have taken revenge on Scopos, the client who refused to pay him. The method of loci becomes part of Simonides' alibi, providing a reason for him to be in Scopos' home (contracted to deliver a panegyric) and a convenient excuse for his survival (he was called away). The mnemonic device, in this reading, is a ruse—Simonides fabricates it to identify the dead and secure contracts for their eulogies, using memory to serve his own economic interests.

This interpretation diverges from the traditional reading of the method of loci as an art of memory. Quintilian doubts the practical utility of the technique, implying that it may be little more than a parlour trick. Simonides never had to prove the accuracy of his mnemonic device; he could have confused the identities of the dead, and no one would have known. Quintilian's scepticism hints at a richer, more sophisticated art of memory, one that transcends the mnemonic technique used in Simonides' alibi. The inclusion of the Dioscuri in this story highlights the importance of the economy in the production of memory and information. Simonides' preoccupation with payment for his poetry points to a concept of memory as transactional or economic. In IR, this could be likened to the 'cost' of retrieval—whether in terms of computing resources, relevance, or user attention—making efficiency and precision crucial elements of the process.

Building on the reinterpretation of Simonides' method of loci, it is insightful to contrast his broader mnemonic practices with those of his contemporary, the lyric poet Sappho. Unlike Simonides, whose approach to memory was structured and precise, Sappho's method was deeply embedded in evoking powerful emotional responses. Her memory practices were not concerned with

accuracy but with creating an atmosphere that cultivated feelings of serenity and beauty through pastoral landscapes and religious spaces. This focus on affect and atmosphere provides an alternative perspective on the method of loci, emphasizing the emotional and ethical dimensions of memory rather than mechanical recall (Jarratt, 2002, p. 20). Such an approach underscores the importance of the loci's emotional resonance—a factor that cognitive science affirms as crucial in memory retention (McGaugh, 2013; Reisberg & Hertel, 2004). Sappho's flexible and fluid use of memory loci introduces a third concept for information retrieval (IR): the ethical positioning of memory. This concept explores how the selection and application of memory (or information) in IR can shape outcomes and influence moral judgments. For IR scholarship, this raises important ethical considerations about the retrieval process, the use of information, and its broader societal impacts. Additionally, Sappho's perspective recontextualizes Quintilian's rendition of the Simonides myth. Quintilian acknowledges the familiarity of the story, suggesting that readers fill in the gaps (Quintilian, 1922, p. 11.2.11). He recounts Simonides' alleged motivation to secure payment from his patron, possibly through coercive means. This interpretation notes that Simonides may have orchestrated the collapse of Scopos' dining hall, using his mnemonic method as an alibi to avenge unpaid debts and ensure future employment. In this light, the method of loci becomes more than a tool for memory—it transforms into a strategic device for achieving justice and retribution.

Quintilian's description enhances this interpretation by noting the mnemonic power of physical places to evoke past interactions, emotions, and unresolved conflicts. When Simonides revisits the location of his dispute with Scopos, not only does he recognize the place, but he also vividly recalls the slight and his ensuing moral outrage. Memory, then, serves as a '*symbol of navigation*', guiding Simonides through a landscape charged with ethical implications and leading him to recall not just events, but also the emotional weight they carried. This navigational aspect of memory uses symbols—like the Dioscuri representing money—to evoke the loci of betrayal and poetic justice.

The ethical narrative extends into Cicero's interpretation, where memory is described not merely as a technique for recalling facts but as a method for imposing order and moral reckoning on past injustices. Cicero suggests that the effective use of memory involves selecting meaningful loci that align with the facts one wishes to remember, thus preserving both the sequence of events and their ethical (Cicero, 1942, p. 2.86.354). Contrary to a simplistic understanding of Simonides' memory technique, Cicero portrays it as a complex interplay of memory, ethics, and oratory, where the loci selected are imbued with the moral values and philosophical insights gained through a lifetime of experience and education.

A closer reading and contextualization of Simonides along with Cicero's and Quintilian's description of the poet highlight how memory emerges from an affective orientation shaped by education and ethical considerations. The art of memory is not just about linking names to seats but about using one's memory to navigate the philosophical and ethical challenges of life, emphasizing the role of oratory in cultivating a public voice that resonates with personal convictions and societal values. This reframing lends itself to several models that can enrich theory development in IR. The following section uses the hermeneutical methods from this section to propose concepts to supplement current IR research.

Results

This section describes theoretical concepts that can be implied from the Simonides myth and how they might inform new studies in IR. The interpretation in this paper lends itself to four concepts that can be useful for developing theory in IR. These are offered as ways to think about how to measure and operationalize important parts of IR systems, both those that exist and those be developed. Many of these concepts have existing research that can further contribute to developing them as a part of IR modelling.

Economy

The concept of 'economy' refers to the transactional nature of memory, particularly how memories are formed, stored, and recalled as a form of currency in both cognitive and social interactions. Most IR research that takes up the idea of information economy largely focuses on information as economic commodity in a larger market of goods (Porot, 1998; Varian, 1995). In the narrative involving Simonides, the Mnemonic Economy is vividly illustrated through his preoccupation with the economics of poetry and his legendary concern for the compensation of his artistic work. His method of loci isn't just a tool for remembering but a strategy to negotiate and secure payment. The memory technique serves as a medium through which the value of memory and knowledge is negotiated—both literally, in terms of Simonides securing his dues, and metaphorically, to assert the worth of his intellectual labour. For example, 'economy' can be seen in how advertising works as part of information behaviour, where brands create memorable slogans or jingles that consumers recall at the point of purchase. Simonides' myth highlights how memory produces the conditions of information value. Information is influenced both by economic interests while also encouraging new economic interests, as a strong, memorable brand identity can drive consumer behaviour and increase sales.

Judgment

'Judgment' in IR would refer to the ability to discern and recall information that is pertinent to one's current context or needs, reflecting a sophisticated form of cognitive judgment. Simonides' use of the method of loci exemplifies this concept as he strategically remembers and organizes information based on its relevance to his situational and emotional context. When revisiting the place of his previous humiliation, Simonides recalls not only the physical space but also the emotional landscape of his interaction, including the unresolved conflict and his moral outrage. This selective recall guided by relevance to his goals (securing justice and reparation) underscores the inherent judgment involved in what is remembered and what is left aside. A juror in a trial uses judgment over information when they focus on specific testimony or evidence that aligns with the legal questions they must consider in their verdict. This selective memory encourages them to ignore some information and focus on what is most critical for their decision-making process. Judgment as a concept may be particularly important as new IR systems that integrate generative AI transform where and when acts of judgment occur (Hersh, 2024).

Symbol-affect

The concept of 'symbol-affect' highlights how information is not only about recalling discrete facts but also about invoking the emotional and symbolic meanings attached to those memories. In your narrative, the places and symbols (like the Dioscuri as representations of money and betrayal) are imbued with deep emotional significance that informs Simonides' recall process. These loci are not just spatial or visual markers but are charged with affective energy that colours the information and influences the recall process. Simonides' emotional response to these symbols guides his recollection and actions, demonstrating how information can be a deeply affective experience, shaped by the emotional resonance of the symbols and places encoded in one's memory. A war veteran might have a strong emotional reaction when visiting a war memorial, which serves as a symbolic loci triggering memories not just of the events, but of the emotions felt during those times—fear, camaraderie, loss. This example shows how locations steeped in personal or collective emotion can dramatically shape memory retrieval, specifically regarding user relevance (Saracevic, 2017).

Informational alibi

Informational alibi involves the use of mnemonic techniques not just for recall but as a strategic defence or justification for one's actions, embedding a deeper narrative purpose within the mnemonic practice. In the story, Simonides crafts an alibi through his method of loci, using it to justify his presence at and departure from Scopos' banquet. This alibi serves a dual purpose: it

provides a cover story that exonerates him from involvement in the catastrophic events and strategically positions him to claim a moral high ground in the aftermath. The informational alibi thus becomes a tool for narrative construction, where information serves not only as a recall mechanism but to weave a narrative that aligns with the individual's broader objectives and ethical stance. In legal settings, a witness might reconstruct their memory of an event in a way that aligns with a narrative beneficial to their side of the story. For instance, remembering and emphasizing details that support their innocence, or the guilt of others can serve as a mnemonic alibi, strategically shaping the narrative recounted in court. The concept of informational alibi can help illuminate IR concepts related to system transparency (Bernard & Balog, 2023).

Conclusion

The above critical reading of the Simonides myth introduces new concepts important for advancing IR. This research's analysis extends beyond the traditional understanding of the method of loci as a simple mnemonic device, proposing a more complex interaction between memory, ethics, and economics that transcends the purely cognitive functions typically associated with IR systems. The story of Simonides, as reinterpreted here, does not merely illustrate a method for enhancing memory recall but also exposes the ethical and economic dimensions that can influence memory practices. These dimensions are not merely side effects of IR systems, they are critical for understanding how IR and users work together. Simonides' strategic use of memory for securing justice and recognition, along with the symbolic representation of money through the Dioscuri, underscores memory's role not only as a cognitive process but also as a tool for navigating social and moral landscapes. This deeper exploration into the motivations behind memory usage introduces new theoretical concepts for IR, such as mnemonic economy, relevance and judgment, symbolic loci and affect, and mnemonic alibi, enriching the standard IR paradigms of precision and relevance.

By recontextualizing the method of loci through the ethical and affective lenses provided by Sappho and Quintilian, the study highlighted the complex interplay between memory and value systems. This approach suggests that IR systems could benefit from integrating these broader dimensions to more effectively mimic human cognitive and emotional processes. The historical depth provided by Simonides' experiences offers profound insights into the affective dimensions of memory that modern IR technologies still struggle to replicate or understand. In retelling this narrative, this paper does not merely revisit a historical method but revitalizes it, proposing that the principles underlying ancient mnemonic techniques can inform and expand contemporary IR research. This discussion opens new avenues for considering how IR systems might incorporate not only the technical mechanisms of memory but also the ethical and emotional considerations that profoundly shape human memory practices.

The Simonides myth, including its issues dealing with information, ethics, and economics, offers valuable lessons for enhancing the sophistication of IR systems and deepening our understanding of the role of memory in society. This exploration encourages a continuous dialogue on the limitations and potentials of IR, urging a re-evaluation of how technology interprets and engages with human memory and knowledge. As this research navigated the intersection of ancient wisdom and modern technology, the enduring relevance of classical memory practices and their value to IR is increasingly apparent, guiding future innovations in IR toward more sophisticated analysis.

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