

What is a Record?

Differing
visions and
perspectives

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We all require access to original, authentic, usable records. However, a major issue facing society is the extent to which the concept of the digital record has been challenged and, furthermore, to what extent the digital evidence base is at risk because we do not have all the tools to maintain and sustain it through time. In business we use it to inform decision-making, conduct inquiries, hold individuals and organisations to account, to demonstrate transparency, to innovate, to research the past and build on the work of others. However, whilst in a paper world the nature of records was understood and familiar, in the digital world some contend that the nature of records is shifting. This wallet contains different visions and perspectives on the nature of a record that emerged from the RecordDNA international research network. They aim to spark debate, discussion, research and processes for the maintenance of the digital evidence base through time.

Within this wallet there are three visions of a digital record in terms of its record components – or DNA. None are intended to be a perfect vision. They are each intended to raise points for debate with scholars, students and practitioners working in this field and related fields.

Context

Scholars and members of the public rely on records (e.g. birth/death certificates, census and court records) as the evidence base for research; so too do policy-makers and those conducting inquiries. They all require access to original, authentic, usable records. However, a major issue facing society is the extent to which the concept of the digital record has been challenged and moreover to what extent the digital evidence base is at risk because we do not have all the tools to maintain and sustain it through time.

In the digital world the record comprises the granular objects that are scattered yet linked e.g. chains of emails or tweets. Concepts commonly accepted as defining a paper record (originality, unchanging authenticity, contextualised evidence) are highly conflicted and under threat. They are being replaced by uncertainty, mutability and the notion of liquidity. The term record is “archaically physical” – “the record, not the remix, is the anomaly today. The remix is the very nature of the digital” [1]. Other complex issues surround the interrogation of evidential digital records. Many copies may exist with unclear authorship or the definitive original may disappear into a seemingly infinite cyberspace. If there are no ‘original’ records in the digital space what does this mean for the future evidence base? Rethinking the digital evidence base raises many questions.

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In a paper paradigm, we have developed record formats and systems which have enabled us to access, understand, manage and maintain a record through time. In addition, we can potentially more obviously remove and confirm the destruction of paper records from a paper recordkeeping system. It has been claimed that many of the attributes and information skillsets from a paper paradigm can and do translate to a digital world. As far back as the 1980s archival scholar Luciana Duranti explored the role of 'diplomatics' to provide frameworks in paper and digital paradigms discussing the concepts of fact and act, and the function of a document in relation to facts and acts; the persons concurring in the formation of a document, and its nature in relation to them; the genesis of public and private documents; the intrinsic and extrinsic elements of documentary forms; and finally, the methodology of diplomatic analysis [2]. The InterPARES Trust research has built on this framework and vision (see www.interpares.org). Jean Voutssas has developed a map of the concept of the digital record drawing on work from across the entire InterPARES programme [3]. Others have also engaged in this debate, for example the archival academic and practitioner Geoffrey Yeo who has written on his vision of a record [4]. The international records management standard has discussed the qualities of an 'authoritative record' as delivering authenticity, integrity, reliability and usability [5]. The standard recommends frameworks to ensure authoritative records which have often been delivered through systems which can provide 'fixity' for a record, for example through PDF/A. The museum, library and information systems academic, Kiersten Latham has developed a framework which considers the authenticity and fixity of objects (records) from the object itself and from the person interacting with it. From the object, the information can be *intrinsic* ("information conveyed by the object itself", its properties) and *extrinsic* ("the socially contextual information association with an object"). The connection and information conveyed from the person can be *abtrinsic* ("physiological characteristics, including emotional/mental state") and *adtrinsic* ("ascribed to the object rather than the thing itself") [6]. McLeod and Lomas have debated and researched the notions of fixity for well over a decade. In 2008 McLeod discussed the concept of liquidity and its place and value in information delivery. Lomas, through the work of a project entitled Continued Communication, concluded that fixity can be problematic in a world which calls for flexibility and information repurposing.

However, she highlighted the risk that digital records can be prone to splintering, i.e. losing key components whether through design or accident. In 2013, McLeod and Lomas started to advocate for liquidity in terms of the provision of record frameworks which keep key components connected but with the capacity for information to be usable and flexible through time [7]. However, the complexity of this goal is not to be underestimated. Its significance to the survival of the evidence base is key. This work led to the development of the RecordDNA project.

The RecordDNA project took a grounded theory approach to developing a vision of a digital record. The approach enabled different stakeholders to rethink the digital record as a new concept without reference to the past as the starting point. Some participants brought in paper based thinking as valid in certain areas whilst others entirely re-envisioned what is a digital record. Within this wallet there are three visions of a digital record in terms of its record components – or DNA.

The first record vision contains suggested components of a record which were contributed through a global crowdsourcing exercise. Visions two and three were created during a participatory workshop. None of the visions are intended to be perfect. They are each intended to raise points for debate with scholars, students and practitioners working in this field and related ones. Critically the visions are intended to challenge our prior assumptions.

During our discussion we asked many critical questions about what are the components of a record and whether a record can exist without metadata. In the discussions, the reality of the record existence and components was often perceived to be inextricably bound to its wider context. As you look at these visions think about what further questions you would ask, for example:

- What do you see as the range of evidential needs?
- Who are the stakeholders and do we need to rebalance information power(s)?
- What elements would you add to or remove from each vision?
- Is there one vision of a record or are there now multiple visions/realities?
- How would you draw out your own vision of a record?
- Do we need changes to our laws, policies or evidential processes to support the maintenance of the evidence base?

Feel free to share your own thoughts and visions on our blog at:

<https://recorddna.wordpress.com>

We would love to see your vision(s) of a record.

- 1 Keen, A. (2007). *The cult of the amateur*. Nicholas Brealey. pp. 23–24.
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- 3 Voutssas, J. (2017). *Map – Concept of a digital record, Version 1*. InterPARES Trust. Available at: http://iibi.unam.mx/archivistica/Onto/MindMap_A_2017_ver1.html. See also Version 2 http://iibi.unam.mx/archivistica/Onto/MindMap_A_2017_ver2.html and InterPARES 2 project http://www.interpares.org/lp2/display_file.cfm?doc=ip2_ontology.pdf.
- 4 Yeo, G. (2007). 'Concepts of record (1): evidence, information, and persistent representations', *The American Archivist*, 70. Yeo, G. (2008). 'Concepts of record (2): prototypes and boundary objects. *The American Archivist*, 71(1).
- 5 ISO (2016). 15489:1: *Information and documentation – records management. Part 1 Concepts and principles*. ISO (2011). ISO 30300: *Information and documentation management systems for records – fundamentals and vocabulary*. ISO.
- 6 Latham, K. (2016). 'The curious case of floating fixity (and its relationship to authenticity)', *Proceedings from the Document Academy*, 3(2), Article.2. Available at: <http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/docam/vol3/iss2/2>.
- 7 McLeod, J. (2008) Why am I a Records Manager? In: *Inaugural Professorial Lecture, 03 Jul 2008, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK*. Available at: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/8298/1/McLeodInauguralLecture.pdf>. McLeod, J. and Lomas, E. (2013). 'The liquid record in a digital age', *Liquidity Practice Research Symposium*, 14 June 2013. ADRI, the Art and Design Research Institute, Middlesex University, UK. Available at: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/34104>. Lomas, E. (2013). *An autoethnography exploring the engagement of records management (RM) through a computer mediated communication co-operative inquiry (CMC)*. Doctoral thesis, Northumbria University. <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/14398>.

RecordDNA

International Research Network

RecordDNA is a Northumbria University and UCL led international research network bringing together academics, practitioners, users and systems developers to develop a new cross-disciplinary network of stakeholders with wide ranging expertise to explore the question 'In the digital era what is the concept of the record and what implications are there for the usability of the future the evidence base?' Through this work we hope to aid the maintenance of the digital evidence base through time.

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