

RecordDNA: 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?

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The question of what, in the digital era, is the concept of the record and what implications are there for the usability of the future evidence base lies at the heart of information governance agendas and delivery. McLeod and Lomas have debated and researched the notions of records and fixity for well over a decade, exploring concepts of liquidity and digital splintering and advocating 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 (McLeod, 2008; Lomas, 2013; McLeod and Lomas, 2013). In March 2017, the RecordDNA international research network was launched bringing together cross-disciplinary, cross sectoral stakeholders, including academics, practitioners, users and systems developers, with relevant wide ranging expertise in order to explore the concept of the record and the implications for the usability of the future the evidence base.

In the digital world 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” (Keen, 2007). 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?

Over a period of year, and through a series of events, the RecordDNA network team, which included a [Steering Committee](#), brought together stakeholders with different knowledge and expertise to explore the nature of the DNA of a digital record and work towards a new conceptualisation. The events comprised workshops and crowdsourcing activities, to ensure that participants from any community and any location were able to contribute. This initial work culminated in an event in Westminster at which Nick Thomas-Symonds MP, All Parliamentary Archives Group, spoke. He stressed the reliance of MPs, amongst others, on records “to inform debate, make better laws and hold the executive to account” but feared we take their availability for granted and, therefore, highlighted the importance of the RecordDNA network.

The outcomes of the network’s activities have been the identification of key challenges for ensuring the future usability of digital records evidence base together with a range of research needed to address the challenges. Different visions of a digital record have also been captured. These have been used to develop a series of infographic outputs aimed at different audiences and stakeholders and for different purposes. In brief they are:

- **Managing your digital footprint** – a leaflet or poster aimed at anyone to raise awareness of how our digital footprint is created and considering what and where it is, who is using it. The roadmap poses a series of questions to enable people to assess how much they know about their digital footprint and how well they are safeguarding it for the future to prompt decisions about other steps they need to take to manage it to meet their needs today, tomorrow and beyond.

- **Developing an R&D agenda to sustain the digital evidence base through time** – a briefing setting out the case for an R&D agenda to address the question explored by the network. It considers the challenge in terms of people issues, technology, policy and processes, as well as ethics, rights and legal issues. Aimed at funders, academics, practitioners and others interested in undertaking research and developing collaborative partnerships to tackle this ‘grand challenge’ in order to sustain the shifting evidence base through time.
- **What is a Record? Differing visions and perspectives** – a wallet containing different visions and perspectives on the nature of a record that emerged from the network. Aimed at students and professionals to spark debate, discussion, research and processes for the maintenance of the digital evidence base through time.

They are freely available at <https://recorddna.wordpress.com> and colour hard copies are available by emailing e.lomas@ucl.ac.uk

We are interested in working with others to further deliver on this agenda. We hope that this network will continue to evolve.

References

Keen, A. (2007). The cult of the amateur. Nicholas Brealey. pp. 23-24

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. Available at: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/14398/>

McLeod, Julie (2008) Why am I a Records Manager? In: Inaugural Professorial Lecture, 03 Jul 2008, City Campus East, 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/>.

Photos to insert

1. Nick Thomas-Symonds MP addressing participants at an event in Westminster
2. Digital footprint – a snapshot of the pathway. Available at: https://recorddna.files.wordpress.com/2018/07/managing_your_digital_footprint_poster.pdf
3. Stakeholders needed to deliver the research agenda. See: <https://recorddna.files.wordpress.com/2018/07/research-agenda-for-the-digital-evidence-base-mcleod-and-lomas.pdf>



1. What are you creating?
2. Is your information accurate?
3. Is it a copy or original?
4. Are you creating it with others?
5. Who owns it?

6. How and where is it stored?
7. Is your data publicly visible, and if so, to whom?
8. Who are you sharing it with?
9. How are you using it?
10. Who else is using it and why?

11. Who is paying the economic cost of retention?
12. Are there other costs, e.g. economic or environmental?
13. Are you in control of it?
14. Are there any legal issues?

The diagram consists of a winding path that starts with a white arrow pointing down into a blue section. The path then turns right into an orange section with a globe icon, then down into a purple section with a document icon, then right into a blue section with a piggy bank icon, and finally down into a green section. The path ends with a small white arrow pointing right.

