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## **“RECORDS IN BECOMING”. CONCEPTS AND CHALLENGES**

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### **Abstract:**

*The paper examines a concept—records in becoming—and its possible implications for archival management. In 1994, Sue McKemmish uses the same term, record in becoming, in order to assert that the record is never finished. Within the framework of Australian records continuum, she supports the idea that at every step in a record existence, at any interaction with people, systems, business process, that record acquire new meanings, annotations, significances, therefore is never finished. Using the same terms in archival literature brings, first of all, confusions and an explanation of the mindset and implications of the two usage is intended. On the other hand, for each case, archival management needs an updated approach, in order to preserve and to deliver the proper representation of record to the users*

### **Key words:**

*records; database; record property*

### **Izvleček:**

#### **Zapisi v nastajanju. Koncepti in izzivi**

*Prispevek raziskuje koncept »zapisov v nastajanju« in njegov vpliv na arhivsko delo. Leta 1994 je Sue McKemmish uporabila termin »zapis v nastajanju«, da bi z njim poudarila, da zapis ni nikoli končan. V okviru avstralskega modela Records Continuum zagovarja mnenje, da zapis v vsaki fazi obstoja, v vsaki interakciji z ljudmi, sistemi ali poslovnimi procesi pridobi nov pomen, razlago oziroma pomembnost in tako nikoli ni zaključen. Uporaba istih terminov v arhivski literaturi povzroča zmedo, zato avtor poskuša razložiti različni rabi koncepta. Za vsako od teh pa arhivska stroka potrebuje posodobljen pristop.*

### **Ključne besede:**

*zapisi, podatkovna zbirka, lastnosti zapisa*

## **1. Introduction**

This idea for this paper came after noticing the expression “record in becoming” appear in professional literature in different contexts with two different meanings. Moreover, the resonance of dynamics of a record, while traditionally the idea itself of a “record” is opposed to those of fluidity, sounds rather strange. In the following, I shall examine the two contexts and I shall make some considerations on the implication of broadening of understanding of the concept of records, as resulted from the status of “becoming”.

## 2. Sue Mc Kemmish: "records are in a state of becoming"

In 1994, in an article analyzing the Australian approach in recordkeeping, Sue McKemmish (McKemmish 1994) argued that: "*The record is always in a process of becoming*". This assertion was based on observations that, while generally it is acknowledged that a record testifies for a transaction, the same record may be involved in several such transactions, each of them adding new "contributions" to that particular record. Let us consider, for instance, that a record is issued by an institution, bearing a certain outgoing registration number. It arrived to the recipient organisation, adding another number. If it is a paper record, the authorized person may add resolution notes on it; if it is an electronic record, that resolution may be embedded or linked to the original record, as annotation. Then, the record is classified, getting a filling code. After decommissioning the current recordkeeping system, that record maybe re-classified, getting another code. It may be a part of a certain folder, getting some other codes, either at the organisation or in the archives.

## 3. Luciana Duranti: "Record... as an entity in fieri, in becoming"

In several articles and presentations (e.g. Duranti 2004, Duranti 2005, Duranti and Thibodeau, 2006, Duranti 2016), Luciana Duranti shares some conclusions of InterPARES and argues that the records may exist as an object *in fieri*, that is, they may be records, but still subjects to completion and additions. Duranti started from the example of an Italian medieval practice (*imbreviaturae*), when notaries did not create a record of a transaction they attested, but only wrote down the name of the parties, data, type of transaction, description of transaction matter or any other data specific to that transaction. By using a standardized documentary form, specific to each type of transaction, the notaries were able to create, later, on demand, a record attesting the transaction, based on "the notes" they had. Those "notes" are records in becoming, since they do not have the documentary form required to attest the transaction, but are the core of that record, being the source for generating the proper record at any time<sup>1</sup>. A modern analogy may be seen in paper Civil Status Offices: while they do not archive birth certificates, they are able at any time to generate one, based on component information existing in birth registers and the proper form.

## 4. Some considerations on "becoming"

Records serve as extensions of human memory, across times and space. In order to be reliable as memory, as "what was done" or "what is to be done," it is necessary the information remembered to be fixed, as content and form. Therefore, the mere idea of "evolution", of dynamic nature of a record may be regarded as absurd.

However, carefully read, the two situations where records are qualified as "in becoming" do not affect the idea of fixity of original information, but question only:

- 1 - the durable instantiation of the record and
- 2 'completeness' of a record as a record.

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<sup>1</sup> „What the notaries really maintained was not the complete record of each transaction, but a record of the content of the transaction and of the documentary form in which it had to be manifested, and the ability to produce a complete record upon request by integrating content and form" (Duranti 2005, 19).

In this regard, the two uses of “becoming” are completely different, since in one case the record is not instantiated, but exist only as a potentiality, and in the second it is instantiated, but it cannot be complete, since it may acquire new information, in time.

Duranti implies the record is not yet instantiated as a durable thing, but it is rather created on demand, anytime. As long as the record can be used when needed, its ephemeral, but repetitive existence as a manifestation at the moment of use may not be a problem.

If we take an example of a bank account, it does not matter if a bank statement is printed on paper or generated every time there is a need for it. Behind the visible record, the banking system holds all the transactional data in its tables, all the queries are prompting for the same parameters and, if values typed are the same, the reasonable expectation is to deliver the same results at any moment in time. On long run, if the same conditions of functionality exist (by using a database technology, provided that the query parameters are the same), or in a different technological framework that would preserve the content, rules for aggregation data and form to display (if relevant), the record exists and it should be the same as in its first instantiation. Of course, there may be a distinction between the “stored record” (components to make up THE record) and “manifested record” (THE record, as intended to be used by human or devices), that Luciana Duranti mentioned. However, after all, what matters is the product intended to be used as a record (that is, the manifested form); it is as if you have your one private secretary, always generating THE SAME record again and again.

While L. Duranti focuses on dynamics of a record until it is produced for use, Sue McKemmish (1994) in fact questions the idea of sameness of one record in time. As Geoffrey Yeo also noticed, “...we should not forget that the creation of a record is only the beginning of its story. The record represents an event, but it also outlives the event and acquires a career of its own. Despite precepts in professional literature about the need for secure and continuous custody, or for meticulously designed systems that will control every aspect of recordkeeping from or even before the moment of creation, in practice we know that things rarely work this way. Records often undergo many vicissitudes during their lives. They are used and misused, ordered and disordered, lost and found, bought and sold. They can be added to one collection and then moved to another, or arranged in one way and then rearranged to meet changing needs or respond to changing whims. Inevitably we must consider the possibility of finding significance in features that result from later intervention as well as those bequeathed by the initial creator” (Yeo 2010).

The perspective revealed by the Australian scholar is consistent with what was about to be later broadcasted as the Australian Records Continuum approach. Regarding the nature of records beyond its immediate use, at a given moment in time, this rather philosophical perspective is not necessarily neither fully innovative, nor naïve, as it may look at first sight. It is not new, because the traditional Diplomats incorporate the idea of annotation, presenting them as part of a record; but it stops in considering it the same record, though it is obvious it suffered a transformation. It is hard to accept that an order issued by a prime minister, that bears different annotations from different ministers, can be considered the same, identical record. Every copy of that order bears marks of a different history, a different workflow, even though the content itself is the same. It may be argued that all this information is not part of the record itself. While this may be true, it is a fact that information on the same carrier, without the fate of the record, cannot be fully understood. On the contrary, an incoming number is the only element showing that document is indeed a record of the recipient organisation. In the same time, assuming “this is not the record”, it would mean all the further annotations would tamper the record, affecting its recordness—which is not the case.

In the same time, while traditional Diplomatics and Archivistics may look to the record as in its original context of creation and use (when and if possible), from historical archival usage, one and the same record may be ground for different interpretations and may be regarded from various angles; its significance and meaning are, therefore, in constant becoming. On the other hand, McKemmish approach is not naïve, in that it cannot be interpreted as ignoring the need of "freezing" the record at a given moment in time. The status of becoming does not mean the record fulfills a certain role "as it was" at a given moment in time. The perspective, therefore, is that records acquire permanently new elements, and the content and form may be frozen at a point on timeline, as a snapshot, but it cannot stop the record by receiving new layers in time, further on. What would be essential is to capture these points in time.

The "becoming" perspectives, beyond their terminological different meanings, bring some concerns in processing and access of records. Considering the dynamic production of records, from the archival description perspective, the whole system may be regarded as a records set, difficult to be qualified in terms of classical archival science. Based on content, it may be a set of records series, if the system can generate statements, balances or other documentary forms. However, on the other hand, the datatables, the forms, the representation rules (manifested in queries and reports) can be considered as records by themselves (Duranti and Thibodeau 2006, 56). How would archival description of such a system look like? Shall we assess the extent with reference to the number of (archival) records (as resulted for each query) or in number of (IT) records (as number of rows for each table)? Shall the content description highlight the information in records, based on record types or the presentation of the logical structure of database and the composition rules? Do we care (strictly from archival description perspective and ignoring preservation issues) about how the database works (stored record) or only about the (archival) records it generates? Stored or manifested? Considering the case of *imbreviatura*: very likely the archivists would give the registers and the forms to the user and it will be his/her task to apply the mechanism in order to retrieve a certain record. Therefore, components would matter and the user would apply the "equation" for retrieval by his/her own. In the case of a database, archivists mostly strive to create a surrogate for the original database, giving the opportunity to the user to find what is needed; in order to retrieve the record, it is not delivered in tables, forms and rules. Moreover, invoking digital preservation, the encoding of data may change, what will matter will always be the manifested record (as in OAIS, the same Information Object may be generated from different Data Objects).

From the continuous development of record perspective, a proper archival processing would imply the harvest of a complex set of metadata layers. Basically, in the best of the possible worlds, any interaction that affected the record should be documented: who, when and why. While for electronic records, in theory, this can be achieved, it is hardly applicable for paper records, dating back from several centuries or even several decades. For many archives, sometimes it is difficult even to properly identify the original fonds, not to mention the proper identification of annotations or other additions to records. In the digital realm, as mentioned, in theory, recordkeeping systems may be created in order to capture relevant information, indeed. However, here at last two issues may appear. Firstly, the concept of "relevant" (or "essential", "fundamental", "key" etc.) is extremely imprecise: who would determine what is a relevant event in the life of a record? For a secret record, an unauthorized access may be a relevant event; for an instructive record, this may be absolutely irrelevant. Secondly, the amount of metadata that can be collected may be huge enough to question the ability to manage/interpret them and, after all their usefulness. In any cases, archival description would be an open matter, being subject to obsolescence if not permanently updated.

## 5. Concluding

The present (electronic) paper looked to different uses of the expression “records in becoming”, showing two different perspectives: as records that are instantiated on the fly (so, in becoming for use) and as records that are instantiated, but acquire new elements (context, annotations, meanings) (so, in becoming for understanding and use). Some of the challenges posed for archival processing and use, when regarding records through the lenses of the two approaches are also highlighted. We did not endeavor to deliver solutions to the issues, since we consider it can hardly be one solution to fit all cases. Nevertheless, awareness is an important step, both in conceptual understanding and practical implementations.

## POVZETEK

### ZAPISI V NASTAJANJU. KONCEPTI IN IZZIVI

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*Luciana Duranti je v svojem prispevku leta 2005 raziskala poseben tip digitalnega zapisa, ki ga je izenačila s konceptom zapisa v nastajanju, »ko se njegov proces nastajanja ne konča«. Osnovna ideja koncepta je v tem, da zapis ni generiran, ampak je pripravljen, da nastane, ko je potreben. To pomeni, da zapis nima nespremenljive vsebine, ampak se lahko ob uporabi istih kriterijev ustvarja vedno znova, kadar je to potrebno.*

*Uporaba istih terminov v arhivski literaturi povzroča zmedo, zato avtor poskuša razložiti različni rabi koncepta. Za vsako od teh pa arhivska stroka potrebuje posodobljen pristop.*

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