

## Trustful hybrid curation, transformation and organization of records in Belgium

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### Summary

*This paper presents the objectives, methodology and preliminary conclusions of the HECTOR research project (Hybrid Electronic Curation, Transformation and Organization of Records). This interdisciplinary project aims at developing a model for the management and preservation of hybrid records (i.e., paper-based, digital-born or digitized) in the Belgian federal administrations.*

**Keywords:** Hybrid records management, authenticity, evidence, digital signature, public service, original record, copy

### Introduction

The coexistence of paper-based and digital-based environments has been an inconvenient situation for a long while in public and private administrations worldwide. The paperless office is still a myth despite major and fast spreading technological improvements in the fields of electronic records management and archiving (Sellen & Harper, 2003). This uneven transition and its resulting situation have created a hybrid environment of records: paper-based records that are digitized and sometimes printed again; digital-born records that are printed and

then scanned. As a consequence, tracking the authenticity and integrity of the record along the chain of custody (Duranti, Eastwood & MacNeil, 2002) is increasingly difficult. This heterogeneity results in information loss and redundancy, waste of valuable resources, legal conflicts and a lack of efficiency of public services.

To tackle these and other challenges and to boost the cultural and scientific research, the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office (Belspo) launched the BRAIN-be program in 2012 (Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks) as an answer to the need for scientific knowledge of the federal departments and to support the scientific potential of the Federal Scientific Institutions<sup>2</sup>. During its first phase and until 2017, the program creates a framework for the development of research projects within 6 thematic areas related to ecosystems, geo-systems, cultural heritage, public strategies, societal challenges and the management of collections.

The HECTOR<sup>3</sup> research project was selected as part of this program, within the thematic area “Federal public strategies”, and will carry out its research work throughout four years.

### **The HECTOR research project**

The main goal of the HECTOR research project is to clear the path for Belgian federal administrations and guide them through an often flurry hybrid environment. To fulfill this objective, the project team will offer hybrid records management and archiving advice in order to enhance trust, transparency and security as well as to minimize the use of unnecessary paper and countless digital copies and to improve the current conditions for the long-term preservation of the information heritage of public authorities. This advice will be accompanied by two transversal models for a trustful, secure and efficient records management.

This guidance will be achieved through an interdisciplinary collaboration between members of the following institutions, each offering expertise in its own fields: the Research Center of Information, Law and Society of the University of Namur for the field of legal sciences; the Information and Communication Science department of the Université Libre de Bruxelles for the field of information sciences; and the Digital Preservation and Access Division of the State Archives Belgium for archival sciences. To complete the team and in pursuance of a more international approach, the University of Montreal and its École de

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.belspo.be/belspo/brain-be/index\\_en.stm](http://www.belspo.be/belspo/brain-be/index_en.stm)

<sup>2</sup> Within these eleven institutions, there can be mentioned the State Archives, the Royal Museum of Art and History or the Royal Observatory of Belgium and Planetarium among others.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hector-project.be>

Bibliothéconomie et des Sciences de l'Information will provide a cross-domain expertise in both archival sciences and law.

Concerning the methodology chosen by the research team and in addition to the aforementioned interdisciplinary approach, the project adopts a bottom-up approach. The starting point of the research are the particularities of hybrid records management found through the analysis of a selection of case studies within the Belgian federal administrations. These case studies reflect the two levels of analysis of the project: 1) the hybrid management of records is analyzed at the Federal and Local Police, the Federal Ministry of Employment and at the Courts; 2) the hybrid management of files is analyzed at the Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain, the Federal Agency for Nuclear Control, the State Archives in Belgium, the Federal Ministry of Finances, and the Federal Ministry of ICT.

The research team will also seek the advice of a Follow-up Committee which is composed of representatives from international and national organizations, federal and local Belgian administrations, as well as of some independent experts and other potential users. All these stakeholders are encouraged to give the team their critical input on the progress of the project in order to directly benefit them in their daily records management and archiving practices.

### **Preliminary results**

After the first year of research, the first level of analysis (the hybrid management of records) is coming to an end. An initial theoretical analysis of the chosen case studies and more than a dozen interviews with the main stakeholders have enabled the research team to draw some preliminary observations.

On the one hand, there exists a tangible legal insecurity regarding key issues such as the digital signature, the probative value of records, the difference between the many versions of the same record in different formats, the difference between an original record and its copy, or the status of digital records. Such legal insecurity constitutes an important obstacle for on-going and future digitization projects, records management policy implementations and digital archiving strategy developments.

On the other hand, the participating stakeholders have shown a widespread interest in the concerns arisen by the research project, an interest clearly linked to a feeling of urgency engendered by never-stopping technological progress and continuously decreasing budgets in the public services. These concerns address technological, legal, organizational, societal, political and economic matters, all of them affecting directly the records management and archiving practices of these same public institutions.

Besides these observations, the field analysis has also shown a worrying lack of proper records management and archiving systems, also called EDRMS<sup>4</sup> (Ste-

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<sup>4</sup> Electronic Document and Records Management System (EDRMS).

phens, 2007). Usually due to reduced financial, technical and human resources, the solutions in place are limited to mere storage and back-up systems. Furthermore, the acceptance and use of this kind of information management solutions depend on the implication of every member of the organization in the development and implementation project of the solution from its early stages. This fact is often understood and tackled through various trainings and yet, these efforts are not enough. Hence, further change management initiatives should be encouraged.

## **Conclusion**

In the context of an ever-changing records management environment, the Belgian public administrative structures are confronted with new challenges due to the existence of hybrid records and files. For the sake of the efficiency in the processing and the exchange of records within these institutions, as well as the appropriate preservation of their information heritage, this research project will continue to analyze different case studies and to assess the subsequent results during its second year, in order to build and share the foreseen models for a hybrid records management and archiving during the third year. Eventually, the fourth and last year of the project will be dedicated to develop e-learning tools on top of an international conference so that the recommended guidelines and models can be shared with different stakeholders.

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