DIGITAL STORAGE SUPPORT FOR CSOS

Experiences and practices of organizations that manage and give access to archives related to defending human rights in Latin America that hold information about human rights crimes.

1. INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Many civil society organizations (CSOs) produce and gather documents from past and ongoing human rights violations to support transitional justice mechanisms and community-based truth, justice and memory initiatives. As part of these critical archiving work CSOs do, different digital related issues appear as a great challenge for them.

The project that provides a frame to the survey whose partial results are included in this publication, was conceived to assess the needs of CSOs and other key stakeholders in relation to digital archiving in countries emerging from conflict or periods of authoritarian rule. Also, to expand existing knowledge by identifying best practices and offer opportunities for exchange and relationship-building on the use of digital archives to advance transitional justice processes.

Due to a lack of capacity and resources, organizations may be unable to effectively archive, store and share their documentation, resulting in a risk that this valuable information could be lost or simply rendered ineffective in pursuing larger goals related to truth-telling, accountability and remembrance.

Memoria Abierta shared a questionnaire designed for organizations with existing digital archives to share information on best practices that have supported them in their digital archiving processes, while also identifying persistent challenges they face in conducting this work. They gathered and systematized here information from four organizations in Latin America. Two from civil society: Londres 38 (Chile) and Memoria Abierta (Argentina) and two State Institutions: Comision Provincial de la Memoria (Argentina) and Museu da Imigração (Brasil).

The four organizations are located in the southern cone and are thematically oriented toward work with archives addressing twentieth-century history and the defense of rights humans. An important issue to highlight is that, due to the period when these processes took place (the dictatorships of Argentina and Chile in the 1970s and the immigration process in Brazil at the beginning of the twentieth century), these files are mostly on paper or obsolete audiovisual formats.
Although these organizations are facing the challenges associated to digital archiving, given the characteristics of their collections, a recurring aspect they raised is that for files to be used, they must first be understood, organized, systematized and accessible. These challenges must be addressed along or even before, facing digitization processes, the organization of digital materials or digital preservation and web accessibility.

The focal points of the questionnaires were:

1. Type of organizations and location of the “Archive”
2. Organization’s digital archive design, description of content, current status and relationship with the complete collection
3. Methodologies for handling digital archive documents and the complete collection, if different
4. Technologies
5. Access-related issues
6. Uses of the archive, sharing their methodology experiences, challenges and lessons learned

Below we will briefly introduce the four organizations that we include in this report.

**State Institutions**

The Comisión Provincial de la Memoria is a self-sufficient entity, financed with an annual budget approved by the legislature of the province of Buenos Aires in Argentina. Its “Leopoldo Schiffrin” Documentation and Archive Center is made up of documentation related to the repressive actions of the State in the past and present, both from documentary collections of the security forces, as well as civil society institutions, private institutions, the justice system and the CPM itself. The CPM is a custodial institution and manages the collection of the Intelligence Directorate of the Province of Buenos Aires, which was founded in 1996.

The Museu da Imigração is a cultural institution of the Secretariat of Culture of the State of São Paulo in Brazil and its mission is to “promote knowledge and reflection on human migration and its contribution to shaping the diversity of the Brazilian society, from a perspective that emphasizes preservation, research and communication of cultural heritage.” To this effect, its main focus is the experience of migrants, both domestic and international, who made the State of São Paulo their place of residence or who passed through.

**Civil Society Organizations**

Londres 38 is a civil society organization located at a memorial site in Chile, where a clandestine detention center for the Directorate of National Intelligence operated, under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Family members of the victims, survivors of the repression, fellow activists, human rights activists and memory activists participate at this institution. It was established in 2009 as the Organización Comunitaria Funcional Londres 38, Casa de la memoria and in 2018 it became Corporación Londres 38, espacio de memorias. As an autonomous organization of the State, since 2009, it first received public funding through the Ministry of Education, and then through the National Service of Cultural Heritage, a division of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage.

Memoria Abierta is an alliance of Argentine human rights organizations created in 2000 that promotes the memory of human rights violations from the recent past, resistance activities and struggles for truth and justice, to reflect on the present and strengthen democracy.
The four selected organizations share the idea of an “archive” as a fundamental tool for promoting knowledge about the recent history of their countries, fostering memory and promoting human rights and democracy.

Although the Museu da Imigração is not restricted to the historical period of the Latin American dictatorships, we consider that the focus of work on migratory processes also contributes to a human rights focus. For all these organizations, the practice of documenting and making various documents accessible aims to build memories about the past in order to confront current issues. Although all organizations produce documentation and also manage documentation produced by other institutions (public or private), we can point out two different types of organizations among those selected.

Memoria Abierta and the CPM are institutions that physically safeguard various donated documentary collections: the CPM safeguards documentation produced by the Police Intelligence Directorate of Buenos Aires and Memoria Abierta safeguards personal collections linked to state terrorism in Argentina.

Londres 38 and the Museu da Imigração have digital copies of documents that belong to documentary collections in the possession of public institutions.

In addition to managing and providing access to documentation produced by other institutions, organizations and individuals, the four organizations also produce documentation themselves.

Memoria Abierta has an oral archive about topography tools that seek to reconstruct circuits of repression.

Through its various departments and work programs, the CPM collected different voices throughout the territory that related violations of human rights in the past and in the present (for example, prison inspections, interviews with teachers and students participating in the Youth and Memory program, thematic research projects, institutional audiovisual production).

Londres 38 produces oral testimonies with the goal of reconstructing the historical period in which the site became a center of repression and extermination, and its impact today, as well as the memories of struggles and social and political resistance prior to the dictatorship, during the dictatorship, and up to the present time.

The Museu da Imigração has, according to its most recent inventory, an oral history collection with 577 interviews with migrants representing a wide range of nationalities. The digitization of the Hospedaria archive and the oral history collection are guided by the mission of the Museu da Imigração to: “To promote knowledge and reflection on human migration and its contribution to shaping the diversity of the Brazilian society, from a perspective that emphasizes preservation, research and communication of cultural heritage.”
2.2 Conceptualization of "digital archive" file by the organization, description of content, current status and relationship with the total collection

The founding objectives, the location of the archive, the design of the digital archive and the related activities vary for the four organizations. An initial distinction can be made that allows them to be divided into two groups: one in which the digital archive is not a product in itself, but rather digital files are just one more medium, the product of one of the stages of the process of archival work (digitization of physical documents), whose ultimate purpose is the preservation of paper and to broaden accessibility. In this group we include Memoria Abierta and the Comisión Provincial de la Memoria.

As mentioned above, since their founding the CPM and Memoria Abierta were conceived as institutions to safeguard and manage archives. For this reason, their work is focused primarily on the preservation, organization and systematization of physical archives. Digitization is part of the archival work process, one of its last stages, but not its main objective.

For example, when the CPM took over the fund from the Intelligence Directorate for the province of Buenos Aires (DIPPBA), the task of digitizing the collection was raised almost immediately to guarantee its preservation by avoiding manipulation of the originals. In turn, digitization allowed the implementation of a search engine that gives access to digitized material. However, this does not constitute a "digital archive" in itself, but rather a management tool for the documentary collections that the institution has.

Although both institutions have other types of documentation (audiovisual records of the crimes against humanity trials, oral testimonies, etc.) in digital format, they are not considered a "digital archive." On the other hand, these files become part of various documentary series that are classified by the organization and its producing area rather than by documental support.

For the other organizations (Londres 38 and the Museu da Imigração), the organization’s archive is the “digital archive,” since they are not custodial institutions but rather managers of documentation copied from other organizations. Londres 38 and the Museu da Imigração are institutions that considered their archives as digital from the beginning, because they work with copies of documentation located at other institutions.

Londres 38 defines the Digital Archive as the department that collects, organizes, describes, preserves and gives access to the documents produced and collected by Londres 38, as part of its functions and activities (memory and institutional dissemination), as well as a common theme, which refers to the historical period in which Londres 38 became a center of repression and extermination, its history and impact today, as well as the memories of its protagonists.

The Museu da Imigração created a digital archive from selected materials (topics, chronology and geography) defined in its curatorial project with the goal of addressing them interactively in the institution’s communication activities. Digitization was seen as a way to preserve the information, by keeping a copy of the data and limiting the continual manipulation of the originals, and as a means of expanding access.

2.3 Methodologies for documentary handling of the digital archive and the complete archive, if different.

Despite substantial differences in their composition and foundational objectives, the four organizations have adopted an archival work methodology, applying the international description standards (ISAD-G and ISAAR CPF).
The general standard is a description standard to documentary sources and collections that respects the principle of provenance and original order. To this effect, the comprehensiveness of the archive is not provided by the format of the documentation, but rather by the institutions that produce the documentation that is received or safeguarded by the organization.

In the case of Londres 38 and the Museu da Imigração, which store copies of documentary collections and sources that belong to other organizations, they carry out comprehensive description work of the documentation received. They carry out an exhaustive investigation of the institutions that produce the documentation received, in order to contextualize it and organize it on the basis of their production criteria, and not on the basis of thematic or consultation criteria.

The CPM and Memoria Abierta receive documentary collections that remain in their possession. They apply the steps of the documentary work process: reception, installation, identification, classification, ordering, description, digitization, access.

Londres 38 and Memoria Abierta have developed manuals and protocols that, beyond the general standards, systematize the specific practices adopted by organizations in their daily work. For example, the preparation of manuals for archival work procedures and thesaurus for the oral archive.

2.4 Applied technologies

2.4.a. Methodologies related to the digitization process

The four organizations agree that the digitization of documentation allows better public access to their archives and also avoids manipulation of the original documentation.

Another point of convergence is that they emphasize the importance of identifying and describing documents with archival criteria before starting the digitization process. Once this process is finished, they digitize and situate the digitized documentation according to the classification and description of standards that were previously defined.

In almost all cases, digitization focuses on the technological challenge it poses and there seems to be a consensus that protocols and methodologies must be strengthened. Indeed, a problem that is shared and recognized by several organizations is that they do not have established protocols or written standards addressing digitization processes. Therefore, establishing a solid protocol appears to be a relevant area of interest. To a certain extent, Memoria Abierta, which has experience in internal procedure manuals, shows a greater degree of progress in the standardization of digitization processes within the organization. It is currently working on the development of a manual that addresses digitizing for all types of documents.

Despite the lack of common protocols, there is a trend to uniformly address the use of different types of scanners employed by organizations for digitizing photographs and paper documentation (TIFF format, uncompressed at various resolutions for preservation). However, the significant problem posed by the digitization of other documentary media, such as audiovisual and sound records and slides, does not seem to have been brought up.

The four organizations show different progress in the processes of digitization of their archives, with the Museu da Imigração as the furthest along. This is partly explained by the fact that three of the four organizations have handled digitization work, which is high-volume and requires long-term planning, with internal resources. In the case of the Museo, the digitization process was carried out by the São Paulo State Public Archive.
2.4.b Storage

Although the process of managing and storing digital documents is not approached in the same way by the four organizations, it is possible to draw some conclusions in relation to the shared difficulties, the different approaches and also similarities of common criteria and ambitions.

First, two of the four organizations use their own servers. Both Memoria Abierta and the Comisión Provincial por la Memoria use servers housed in their own offices that are managed internally.

In the case of the Comisión Provincial por la Memoria, the digitized documentation is stored on servers and on external drives while Memoria Abierta is in the process of migrating its digital archives from a mixed storage system, including a local server, LTO tapes and external drives, to an NAS system. Both institutions shared the importance of the periodic need to scale up storage space.

By contrast, both Londres 38 and the Museu da Imigração use private cloud-based storage services. Contracts with external providers such as Dropbox, Google Drive and Amazon allow them to outsource maintenance and technical management so that problems associated with obsolescence and backups are not central issues for these organizations.

Sometimes, it seems the demand from those who wish to use the archives makes digitization and online documentation a priority. This is very clear in the case of the Museu da Imigração. They responded to the audience’s requirements and accelerated digitalization as well as its accessibility. In the case of Londres 38, the central importance of the digitization process seems to be related to the institution’s own document management system: when working with donated documentation, the organization returns the material to its producer once digitized.

Memoria Abierta, on the other hand, has a mixed policy. Some materials that the institution receives must be digitized because the original physical media is returned to the producer. There is other documentation that is donated or managed that must be preserved internally in its original format.

This leads to another main area of convergent interest for two of the four organizations: the challenges associated with the preservation of the original documentation on paper, photographic or audiovisual media. Both Memoria Abierta and the Comisión Provincial por la Memoria preserve sensitive documentation on paper; they must first face the challenge of long-term preservation of originals, using appropriate boxes and components for this purpose.

Another problem shared by both the Comisión Provincial por la Memoria and Memoria Abierta is related to the preservation and accessibility of audiovisual records. This format has specific challenges due to technological changes making some of them obsolete causing difficulties for ensuring access and reproduction. In addition, the preservation of audiovisual records requires facilities with humidity control and continuous cooling that involve investment and maintenance.

Despite the different approaches, all the organizations are interested in reviewing and systematizing their digital archives policy in order to make storage and long-term preservation sustainable. There is a growing awareness that a policy of this type requires a solid, updated strategy to prevent both the loss due to instability of digital storage and the obsolescence of software and access systems. The four organizations highlight the economic difficulty of maintaining the facilities that preserve the original documentation in different formats, as well as the storage of digital documentation. Whether with its own servers or contracting external services, maintaining and scaling storage capacity is very expensive for these types of institutions.
2.4.c. Data processing

The four organizations agree on the importance and complexity of the problems associated with data processing and the importance of the selection, installation, maintenance and development of information management and access software. There is general agreement regarding the importance of having a solid system, both for internal management and for the web dissemination of catalogs and archival descriptions. However, while some organizations also prefer online access to documentation through their platforms, others, such as Memoria Abierta or the Comisión Provincial por la Memoria, must restrict access due to the sensitivity of the documentation they keep.

Different approaches and pursuits are seen in the selection of the software. Three very clear strategies are seen among these four organizations: the use of open-source software, the use of proprietary software, and the developing of their own software. However, it is important to highlight that the international standards mentioned in point 3 software apply to all types of software.

Both the Comisión Provincial por la Memoria and Londres 38 have opted to implement the open-source archival platform AtoM (Access to Memory), which is installed on a server and whose central functions can be controlled from a standard browser. Specifically, the Comisión Provincial por la Memoria uses a mixed strategy because AtoM, used for public access, converges with another approach for internal management that includes both the use of paid license software as well as software that was developed internally. The Museu da Imigração, on the other hand, uses proprietary software. Its oral archive is available on the BNWeb platform, a proprietary information management system for libraries, archives and documentation centers, whose license was purchased by the institution and includes maintenance and technical management. In contrast, Memoria Abierta recently implemented custom software developed by a specialized company. It is a system that combines the upper-level archival descriptions with descriptions of each item or documentary unit and is managed and accessed from a web browser.

The technical specificity of data management, the complexity of installation, updating and maintenance are another shared problem. Without internal IT departments, some organizations require the assistance of external consultants or coordination strategies with other public or private institutions, such as universities or private companies.

Organizations that opted for free software platforms or custom development emphasize the importance of autonomy offered by these strategies compared to the alternative of proprietary software, which is not always customizable and often requires costly upgrades. For this reason, in some cases, organizations have decided to migrate from a proprietary content software system to open source platforms. While some organizations use OCR technology for the scanning process, others have decided not to use it, either because they have a large collection of manuscript material or because they prefer archival description.

2.4.d Security and access

Another focus in relation to the type of institutions and the documentation they safeguard is connected to the strategies adopted for the security of digital information during the access and safeguarding processes.

Looking past the differences in the software adopted by each organization, there is a common goal for the systems to manage accounts and user groups, as well as grant or limit access permissions. Generally, all the systems adopted by organizations allow differentiation of user-profiles and roles, which are defined according to access levels.
In terms of protecting information, the organizations that have their own servers use an internal strategy, generally not automated, of making backup copies of their documentation on external disks or on alternative servers. In contrast, the institutions that chose to outsource the storage of their digital files in the cloud, outsource the responsibility of security management both for access to documentation and for making backup copies.

In those institutions that safeguard sensitive documentation, similar strategies are seen. The Comisión Provincial por la Memoria houses digital backup copies in the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine (France) and in a safe deposit box of the Bank of the Province of Buenos Aires. Memoria Abierta has entered into an agreement with the Institut national de l'audiovisuel (France) for the storage of a copy of the testimonies from its oral archive.

2.5 Issues related to access

The four organizations have very diverse user profiles. The public that accesses both the consultation room and the web platform is varied, including researchers, high school and university students, victims of human rights violations, relatives of victims, activists, artists, journalists, members of social and organizations, national and international general public interested in learning about the historical processes focused on by each institution.

For both Londres 38 and the Museu da Imigração, the majority of the digital archive is accessible via the Internet, except for the full versions of the testimonies.

In the case of the CPM and Memoria Abierta, access to the catalog and general description of the sources and documentary collections is allowed from the web, but access to the document is given in person at the main office. External users access the materials through user profiles that only allow access to some sources, collections or sections. Full access to the file is handled by reference librarians.

2.6 Uses of the archive, sharing of methodological experiences, challenges and lessons learned. (focal point 6)

2.6.a. Uses

The four institutions emphasize the secondary use of documentation for research, educational purposes and to deepen the memories of processes in the history of the twentieth century. In particular, the archive of the CPM has contributed to federal legal processes for crimes against humanity.

At the same time, another peculiarity is that by making such diverse, dispersed and difficult-to-access documentary sources accessible, many people have experienced a significant moment in their family history and can also access personal memories and narratives. They are also a source for academic researches on various topics.

The objective of the archive work is increasing awareness and granting access in an easy and efficient way to the documentation generated and/or compiled by the organization. They manage the information systems and resources according to the ethical, historical and political framework, and the organization’s mission and objectives.
2.6.b Networks

Some of these organizations belong to Memory and Human Rights Archives networks, as is the case with Londres 38, which is part of the RAMDH (Red de Archivos de Memoria y Derechos Humanos).

The CPM has entered into agreements with other institutions such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington (USA) and with the National Security Archive (NSA), as well as national universities.

Memoria Abierta coordinates projects in relation to archives for social organizations in the Latin America and the Caribbean Sites of Memory Network (RESLAC) and has become an access point for SHOA Foundation archive and the Fortunoff archive.

2.6.c Challenges

Generally, the challenges the four organizations face are related to the management of a large volume of documentation generated and/or collected over short periods of time and with scarce resources. Another significant challenge is creating technical norms and standards taking into consideration the needs and requirements of users.

An interesting challenge, pointed out by the Museu da Imigração, is the research necessary to contextualize the documentation that is part of the collection. To this effect, archival tools are considered essential for providing context and promoting understanding of the sources and documentary collections managed. They all mention the difficulty of staying up-to-date with technological developments, especially in terms of digitization and digital preservation.

And finally, several of the organizations highlight the need to work on protocols and standards, as well as having a more active policy for monitoring the user community, especially those who only have their archive digitally on the web.

2.6.d Lessons Learned

All four organizations highlight the importance of applying the archival workflow before beginning any digitization. To create an archive, it is first necessary to understand, identify and describe. As the Museu da Imigração points out, at the time of digitization, you must consider what important information for the documentation and search systems will be collected; develop the search system based on the demands of the users and use flexible systems to facilitate changes and new insertions of metadata. Memoria Abierta remarks the importance of collaborative construction of tools and software in order to reduce dependency on large companies.

The choice of free software over those developed by companies stands out as a way to achieve a sustainable process over time and maintain autonomy.

Finally, it is emphasized that the digitization of sources and documentary collections facilitates access and guarantees the preservation of the originals. At the same time, constant work is needed to research and develop different access alternatives that promote a closer relationship between the “archives” and the users.
3. FINAL THOUGHTS

The use of archives to create memories about the past, to deepen their understanding and to expand the field of recent history has been consolidated as a fairly common practice. Today, the need for organizations to have their files in formats that allow broader access, such as digitization and web platforms, is evident.

One of the greatest lessons learned highlighted by the organizations consulted (which we intend to convey in this document) is the fact that, for files to be used, they must first be understood, organized, systematized and accessible. They mention this precondition as the main challenge for digitization processes for organizing originally digital materials as well as for long-term digital preservation and online access.

To this effect, it is important to highlight that the digitization or digital storage process is only one stage of the documentation work process. Digital storage is not possible if these documents were not previously preserved, classified and described, guaranteeing the preservation of their order of provenance and original order and reconstructing their production contexts. For this reason, in addition to talking about the challenges involved in digitization, it is also necessary to keep in mind the general challenges of a comprehensive work process.

This situation brings us to mention a fundamental premise: the document produced, whatever its format or method of writing, is the result of the activities of departments, people or institutions; it reflects the activities carried out over time. In her classic manual, Antonia Heredia Herrera refers to “new documents” which actually means new format (such as audiovisuals), and she states that “it is only a new type of document and with regard to their treatment (organization and description), everything already discussed will be valid” (Heredia Herrera, 1991: 150). In keeping with this view, the Multilingual Archival Terminology database of the International Council on Archives, when referring to the digital archival document defines it as “a digital document that is treated and handled as an archive document” (InterPARES, 2012).

To this effect, as the words of Heredia Herrera indicate, originally digital materials must be organized according to the same criteria used in the organization of the entire collection. In this way, the digital documentation must be contained in the groupings given by the classification of the collection to which it belongs. Ideally, the structure provided in the classification chart for the organization of the folders where the digital archives are located could be replicated, so that the organization of our documents inside the computer reflects the organization of the collection, and each new document that is created is integrated into the existing documentary groups.

Whether we are talking about digitized documentation, documentation that is able to be digitized or originally digital documentation, the digital support is valued by organizations to the extent that it allows:
- scaling up or expanding access to archives
- preserving the archive in the medium and long term

However, it is important to reemphasize some fundamental issues: when speaking of a “digital archive” as an entity in itself, one runs the risk of underestimating the comprehensiveness of the archive, which is not provided by the format in which the archive is found, but rather, as we have already pointed out, by the institutions that produce the documentation and the context of its production. On the other hand, by setting digitization as a primary goal, the need for prior archival work may be lost sight of, without which digitization may become more of a problem than a solution. Finally, it is impossible not to consider the costs of these processes, which in many times are far beyond the abilities and resources of civil society organizations. It is essential to bear in mind that there should be procedural manuals that promote good practices and adequate financing for the promotion of digital media and memory work.