

 Posted on Archiving Human Rights, Campaigns

 Tweet this  Share  Read later

Findings from our global survey of archiving needs and practices

By WITNESS

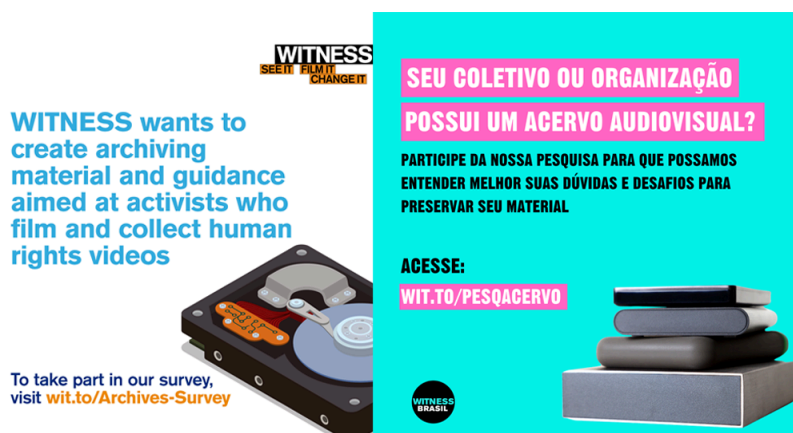


Written by [Ines Aisengart Menezes](#) and [Yvonne Ng](#)

A key part of WITNESS's work is to help activists archive and preserve their videos so that they can be used to advance human rights, now and in the future. Over the years, we have consistently heard from partners and peers that archiving is a major gap in their capacity, and that guidance like our [Activists' Guide to Archiving Video](#) has been a unique and valuable resource.

As part of our effort to ensure the new guidance we are planning continues to meet the current challenges faced by documenters today, in 2022-2023 we conducted a survey to ask activists and community-based human rights practitioners who are creating and collecting videos across the world about their audiovisual archiving needs and practices.

Thanks to the creativity of our amazing regional communications team, we were also able to use the survey distribution as an opportunity to share more information and tips about archiving!



Images about the survey in [Spanish](#), [English](#), and [Portuguese](#).

Who are the respondents and what are they creating or collecting?

We heard from 28 respondents to our survey across all regions. Here is a summary of what we have learned to date, including the most common challenges we heard.

All of our respondents collect audiovisual materials, and some also create their own audiovisual materials. They collect content in a wide range of formats and types, including video, audio, photographs, social media, interviews, livestreams, and instant messages.

A very diverse range of human rights issues are represented in the materials that respondents collect, including media about the defense of water and Indigenous territories, violations in the context of social mobilizations and protests, testimonies from detainees and prisoners, interviews about mass incarceration and the death penalty, and many others topics.

Almost all respondents intend for their collections to be used as documentary evidence of human rights violations, towards a variety of interrelated ends. Those ends include:

- promoting restorative and transformative justice,
- promoting accountability,
- supporting legal actions and advocacy campaigns,
- enabling creative resistance,
- preserving memory,

- amplify the voices of victims and survivors, bring visibility to their stories and struggles, and
- engage the public in conversations about human rights and justice.

Challenge 1: Priorities and Budget / Capacity

“Our biggest challenge is related to cost and time. Given the need to prioritize paid work for the survival of the members and the cooperative, we do not usually have the time necessary to organize our collection properly.” ([Coletivo Catarse](#))

By far, the most significant challenge respondents cite across all of the regional surveys is lack of budget and time due to competing priorities. For the most part, respondents are creating, collecting, and archiving as a small part of the work they do towards larger human rights advocacy goals. They are small and/or volunteer-run, and do not have budget or team members solely dedicated to archiving. Collection is often ongoing, so the “backlog” piles up over time. Some respondents indicated that they feel overwhelmed and do not have enough time to deal with their archives. A few respondents also indicate that they have to prioritize paid work.

Challenge 2: Storage Capacity and Organization

“We have been registering and publishing since 2004; we do not delete or eliminate the records, and therefore we have a lot of material in various file formats and devices. This generates permanent difficulties of lack of space, security, preservation and organization of records.” ([Lluvia Comunicación](#))

Storage capacity, along with disorganization of stored files and lack of protocols for managing and utilizing storage (or challenges adhering to

protocols if they exist), are also significant challenges that respondents report across regions. Respondents note the relatively large file sizes of videos and photos compared to textual documents, and that despite their finite storage capacity their collections are growing every day. Many respondents say their collections are disorganized because they lack the time, resources, and techniques to properly maintain their collections.

Respondents report relying on a combination of hard drives, cloud storage like Google Drive, and mobile phones to store their collections. Cost is repeatedly cited as a barrier to implementing more ideal storage solutions. For one respondent, circumstances such as sanctions against their country and the need to make untraceable payments made cloud storage a difficult option. Poor internet and the risk of being detected while uploading were also cited as challenges to using cloud storage.

Challenge 3: Providing Access

Access serves as the pathway to draw attention and solidarity to respondents' projects. Some respondents have identified that their sensitive documentation requires protection from unauthorized access – in some instances, access is only granted through direct requests with an assessment of the requester. Only a few respondents indicate that they can provide access via online database/repository systems. Apart from direct access to the documentation, some organizations share new outputs derived from the collections, such as social media publications, audio storytelling/podcasts, academic and popular media publications, exhibitions, and film screenings (followed by discussions).

Respondents have significant ethical concerns about providing access related to distressing and graphic content, safeguarding the victims'

privacy, and ensuring consent. One Indigenous documenter highlights their commitment to keeping records solely within their community and sharing directly with partners; however, they are concerned that they cannot ensure control over this.

Challenge 4: Safety and Security

“There needs to be a free, spacious and secure storage for political and human rights defenders, independent journalists and researchers who live and work in dictatorships, including those isolated due to sanctions (which doesn’t allow payments for storage services).” (anonymous)

The security of the documentation in a human rights archive can impact a community’s safety and their ability to seek justice. Yet, the safety and security of the archives are directly connected to funding, which is the most significant challenge noted by respondents – as cited above. Budget limitations restrain investment in robust storage systems and comprehensive cybersecurity measures to safeguard media from unauthorized access, hacking, or data breaches. A couple of organizations also reported stolen devices as a challenge.

Anonymous reporting empowers victims and witnesses to share their experiences without fear of retaliation, enabling organizations to gather thorough data while prioritizing their safety.

In ongoing conflicts, when local authorities can scrutinize community organizations, the archive must be secure and inaccessible to repressive forces. One respondent in this situation identifies mostly-known free cloud services as being easy to track. At the same time, paid options can be unattainable due to financial sanctions or are easily traceable. So, the

respondent describes splitting their archive across multiple free clouds, which imposes a risk since some little-known services can expire or get blocked. Also, to diminish the risk of other organization members revealing storage strategies and passwords, only one person knows how to access the archive.

Challenge 5: Trauma and Graphic or Sensitive Content

“...traumatic content and exacerbated post-traumatic stress that I suffered after 2.5 years recording and assisting people on the streets.” (Soledad Cecilia Peña Muñoz, Defensoría de Derechos Humanos V región, Chile)

Several respondents mention the graphic and/or sensitive nature of the videos and images in their collections, such as disturbing videos of police brutality. They note the need for support for their own and their team’s mental well-being from working with the content. One respondent, quoted above, shares that working with difficult content exacerbated existing trauma stemming from their other activism and advocacy work. Respondents also express concern about re-victimizing people in the materials and about protecting their identities, and raise questions about the ethics of sharing distressing content with the public.

What kind of guidance or resources would be most useful?



WITNESS team learning from and sharing video guidance with Coletivo Beture at the 20th Acampamento Terra Livre (ATL, Free Land Camp), the largest Indigenous gathering in the world.

Respondents identified guidance and resources that would be most useful for their human rights archiving projects. They cite a need for general resources on the importance of human rights archives and overviews of the archiving process and archival strategies. Useful formats for guidance would include courses, consultations, lists of software for each archiving step, as well as templates for cataloging.

Respondents named specific topics for which guidance would be helpful, such as:

- data verification,

- metadata standards,
- intellectual property,
- consent,
- how to differentiate original files from copies,
- how to create nomenclatures,
- how to document, preserve, and disseminate sensitive content, such as traumatic images and videos,
- protecting sensitive information against potential breaches and privacy, including encryption and anonymization, and
- other data security measures.

Respondents also sought guidance on practical processes, such as collaborative archiving workflows, data sharing among team members, optimizing metadata creation, and migrating data between storage platforms and formats as technology evolves.

Regarding the format of the guidance, respondents say they prefer transmedia content that are accessible via cell phone, short tutorial videos, PDF files, small pamphlets in printable A5 formats, and interactive elements like simulations.

We thank all the respondents who took the time to take the survey! Building upon the valuable insights you shared, in the next year we will be developing new resources next year to continue to provide relevant guidance for activists, movements, and collectives in diverse settings, and we hope to support and address the concerns you raised.

Haven't taken our survey yet? Please feel free to share your thoughts and insights with us [here!](#)

WITNESS has just launched the global campaign ‘#ArchiveLife: Preserving Collective Memory through Video Archiving’ – find out more [here!](#)

AUTHORS:

Yvonne Ng (she/her) is an audiovisual archivist with 15 years of experience working at the intersection of human rights, video and technology, and archives. As Senior Program Manager of Archives at WITNESS, she collaborates with regional teams to support partners to preserve human rights video, and develops accessible guidance and training materials related to archiving and preservation. Yvonne holds an M.A. in Moving Image Archiving and Preservation from NYU.

Ines Aisengart Menezes (she/her) is the Archives Program Coordinator and Technical Director of the ABPA – Brazilian Association of Audiovisual Preservation. Ines holds an M.A. in Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image at the University of Amsterdam – UvA.

~ Published on 8th May 2024.

📌 Archived in Archiving Human Rights, Campaigns and tagged #ArchiveLife, Archiving, community archiving, preservation, video archiving.

↪ Share this article: [f Facebook](#) [🐦 Twitter](#)

Leave a Reply