

Preservation for human rights organisations

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Introduction

Human rights defenders (HRDs) not only produce accurate and reliable information for their immediate goals, such as proving rights violations. They also play a significant role in the collective memory¹: a plural process that actively illuminates and builds meaning on impactful social events; by cultural products, it intends not to forget and not repeat parts of our history. The activities of preservation or conservation of documents and archives are essential to this end.

Preservation encompasses a set of procedures aiming to ensure that information is reusable over time, that is to say, that our documents remain accessible and trustworthy, even with value as evidence, over the years.

This guide is intended to help HR organisations to identify preservation needs for different scenarios and provide them with appropriate tools for each case. The document first identifies the main preservation risks. Then, it provides different examples of preservation goals linked to short, medium and long-term scenarios, to end with an explanation of various actions you can put in practice to guarantee the usability of your digital and physical documents.

Preservation risks

Digital documents

Hacking, obsolescence of formats and software, technology incompatibilities, storage media damage, optical disc degradation, theft, confiscation, etc.

Physical documents

¹ Elizabeth Jelin, a specialized researcher in human rights and the memoirs of political repression, asserts: “Es la agencia humana la que activa el pasado, corporeizado en los contenidos culturales (discursos en un sentido amplio). La memoria, entonces, se produce en tanto hay sujetos que comparten una cultura, en tanto hay agentes sociales que intentan «materializar» estos sentidos del pasado en diversos productos culturales que son concebidos como, o que se convierten en, vehículos de la memoria, tales como libros, museos, monumentos, películas o libros de historia. También se manifiesta en actuaciones y expresiones que, antes que re-presentar el pasado, lo incorporan performativamente (Van Alphen, 1997)”. Elizabeth Jelin. ¿DE QUÉ HABLAMOS CUANDO HABLAMOS DE MEMORIAS?. En de Los trabajos de la memoria, Siglo Veintiuno editores, España 2001. Cap. 2. Disponible en publicación digital: <https://laasociacion.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/memoria-jelc3adn-1.pdf>

Natural threats	Flooding, earthquakes, fire, humidity, dirtiness, fungi, insects, rodents, etc.
Human threats	Theft, confiscation, drives' breaking, fire, etc.

Preservation for different time horizons

Preservation should be considered as a transversal necessity that requires specific actions at different stages of the data lifecycle: from collection to sharing. As we will see later, at the collection moment we can create some marks to later prove the authenticity of the content, we can take actions to ensure that information is stored safely, or we can share the information guaranteeing its integrity, among other actions.

All the preservation actions are carried out keeping in mind the future use of information. This means that our information should remain accessible, findable, properly stored and organised, but also that it preserves its integrity and authenticity. Here are some examples about different information uses in short, mid and long-term:

- In the short-term we can use the data we have collected to search for a missing person or demand the release of an individual in case of arbitrary arrest.
- In the medium-term we can use our data as evidence to litigate and hold the perpetrators of a past event accountable.
- In the long-term we can use the insights of our data to create collective memory and ensure no repetition of past HR violations.

Actions for preservation

There are many preservation actions that you can use depending on your data, preservation challenges and institutional goals. There is not a perfect solution that fits for every situation so, usually, the most effective is to combine them in different moments. Here are some of the most common actions.

1. Migration

Moving data from one place to another can be a good strategy to prevent data loss due to old equipment or obsolescence. Data migration can take different meanings, among them, using new formats (conversion) or systems (database migration), renewing equipment and storage devices, etc.

Once the data is migrated, it will have better conditions for long-term preservation. For further information, you can check [this guide on how to carry out database migration processes](#).

2. Backup

Backing up data is a good security measure as well as a preservation one. Making copies of the data reduces the risk of partial or total loss due to the threats mentioned above. The number of copies, the frequency, the backup method and the location of the copies, among other issues, should be clearly documented in your back up policy. You can learn more on how to assess your information and select the best backup method with [this resource](#).

3. Metadata for preservation

Metadata means data about data. They are used to describe the content of a document, its structure, creation context, etc. They provide valuable information that can be used to organise documents and make them more accessible.

These small pieces of information also play a key role in authenticating documents. Metadata can help to confirm that the data (audio recording, video, picture, etc) was collected at a specific location and time. Some examples of the latter include [Tella](#) and [ProofMode](#), two documentation apps for challenging environments. They automatically assign metadata to the content to prove when and where was collected with the timestamp and the geolocation –automatically corroborated by other users in the same place.

These apps also generate a “digital fingerprint” called hash or checksum that easily allows us to check the integrity and the chain of custody of the file. You can watch [this video if you want to learn what is the hash function](#), and [this one If you want to use it to authenticate your documents](#).

Metadata can also be of help in providing technical and structural information about the document so we can ensure its usability over time. Preservation metadata, such as [the PREMIS standard](#), can help to avoid obsolescence by migration or emulation (replicating old programmes or platforms to view certain documents or run programmes).

4. Digitise your documents

Digitisation, in addition to providing better access to your documents, is a good preservation strategy as it allows to create long-lasting digital copies of damaged materials. Once your documents are digitised, you won't need to manipulate them and its content will remain available without time and space limitations.

If you want to learn what you need for your digitisation project [you can read our guide on this topic](#) or [watch this short video](#).

5. Physical preservation: conservation

The preservation activities dedicated to physical records are often labelled as conservation. As in the digital environment, these activities can take a preventive approach –mainly controlling the storing conditions of the items– or a reactive one –such as restoring old books.

Conservation constitutes a field of study itself in library science, so here we will give you eight tips to minimize the risks for your physical documents. Here are the tips:

1. Adopt a preventive approach: monitor the conditions of your documents.
2. Prepare your risk plan: identify all threats, their probability of occurrence and the vulnerability and value of your documents.
3. Control the storage environment: temperature, humidity, light exposure, etc.
4. Control the access to sensitive information: be sure you close windows and doors. When possible and necessary, install video monitoring systems or alarms.
5. Be aware of the materials used for storage: staples and plastic sleeves can be the worst enemy of your paper documents.
6. Inspect and clean periodically.
7. Train your staff about conservation measures.

8. Digitise whenever possible: you will improve the accessibility of your documents and protect them from theft and destruction.

Additional resources

The Library of Congress. Preservation Directorate: Ensuring long-term access to the Library's collections. <https://www.loc.gov/preservation/>

UNESCO. Information preservation. <https://en.unesco.org/themes/information-preservation>

Witness.org. Activists' guide to archive video
<https://library.witness.org/product/activists-guide-to-archiving-video/>