

Memory as a Battlefield: The Role of Digital Archives in Post-Conflict Truth Wars

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Introduction



Source: Blogs | International

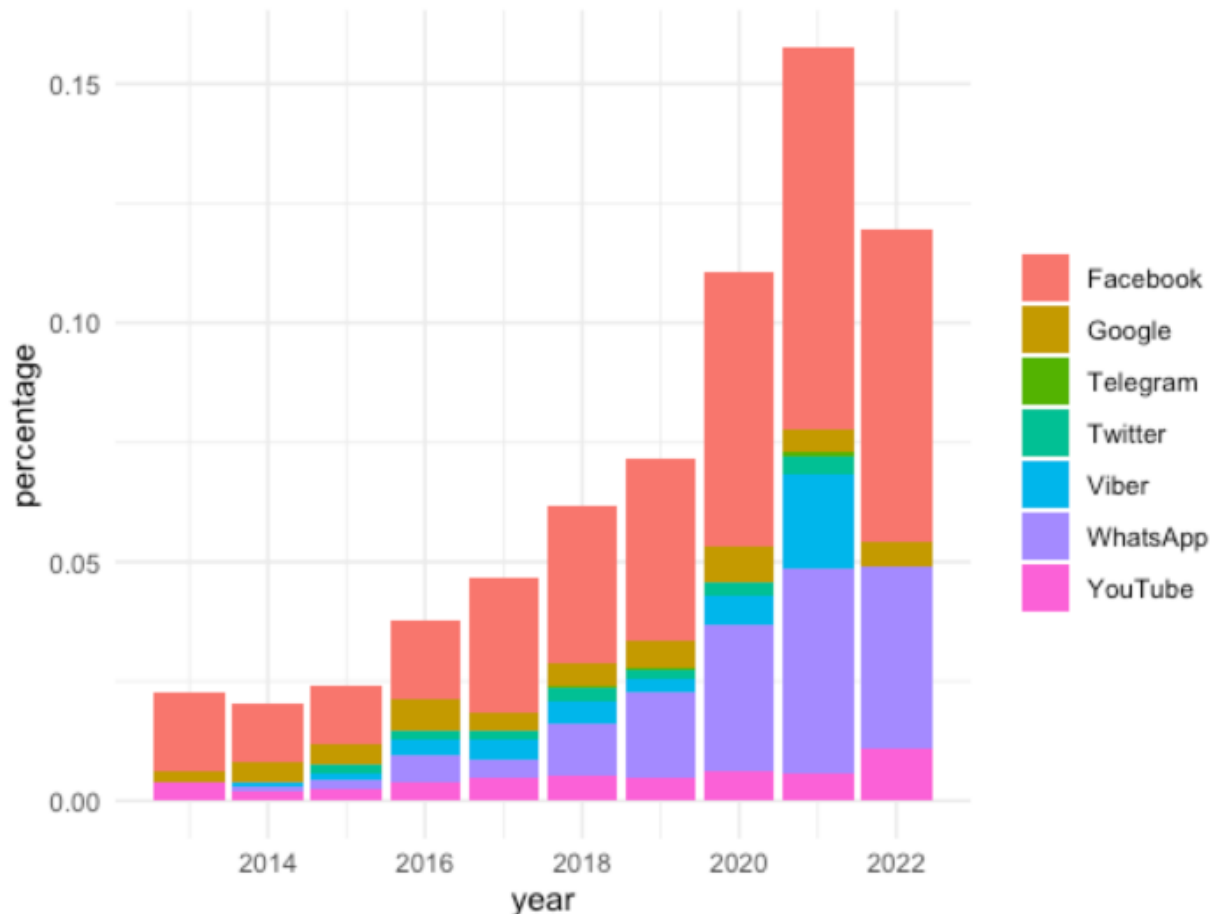
In the aftermath of violent conflict, an equally consequential battle ensues - one fought not with conventional weapons but with narratives, testimonies, and historical records. This secondary battlefield determines how events are remembered, how responsibility is assigned, and ultimately, how societies heal. Digital archives have emerged as critical instruments in these ‘truth wars’, fundamentally transforming how post-conflict societies document, preserve, and contend with their difficult pasts.

As we navigate through an increasingly digitized world, the capacity to collect, store, and disseminate vast quantities of information has created unprecedented opportunities for

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documentation and accountability. However, this same technological capacity has become a double-edged sword, enabling both the preservation of truth and the perpetuation of contested narratives. This commentary examines the multifaceted role of digital archives in post-conflict settings, exploring how these repositories function as sites of memory construction, truth-seeking, justice, reconciliation, and ongoing contestation.

The Evolving Nature of Archives in Conflict Settings



Source : Nature

Traditionally, archives were physical repositories controlled by state authorities, often serving as instruments of power that reinforced official narratives while marginalizing alternative perspectives. The advent of digital archiving has fundamentally disrupted this paradigm, democratizing the process of historical documentation through several key developments:

★ Decentralization of Authority

Digital technologies have dramatically lowered barriers to documentation, enabling a multitude of actors - from international organizations and civil society groups to ordinary citizens - to participate in archiving efforts. This decentralization challenges state monopolies over

historical narratives and introduces a plurality of perspectives that were previously silenced or suppressed.

★ **Expanded Documentation Capacity**

The proliferation of digital recording devices has exponentially increased the volume and types of material that can be captured during and after conflicts. Beyond traditional written records, contemporary archives may include videos, photographs, satellite imagery, social media posts, and other digital artifacts that provide rich, multidimensional evidence of events.

★ **Global Accessibility and Security**

Digital archives can be accessed from anywhere in the world, making it possible to preserve sensitive materials beyond the reach of potentially hostile actors. Cloud storage, encryption, and secure networks protect vulnerable documentation from physical destruction or tampering - a critical consideration in volatile post-conflict environments.

Digital Archives as Instruments of Transitional Justice



Source : Faculty of Law - University of Oxford

The establishment of fair and effective transitional justice mechanisms represents one of the most significant challenges facing post-conflict societies. Digital archives have become essential tools in this process, contributing to accountability efforts in several crucial ways:

★ **Evidence Preservation for Prosecutions**

Digital archives preserve potential evidence of violations that might otherwise be lost, destroyed, or manipulated. The International Criminal Court, for instance, has increasingly relied on digitally preserved evidence in its prosecutions of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) has collected and preserved

over 1.8 million digital items - including videos, photographs, and documents - that could potentially serve as evidence in future prosecutions related to the Syrian conflict.²

★ **Supporting Truth Commissions**

Truth commissions benefit from digital archives by gaining access to diverse perspectives and comprehensive documentation. Following Guatemala's 36-year civil war, the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMHI) created digital repositories of testimonies from thousands of survivors, establishing a powerful counter narrative to official government accounts that had previously minimized or denied human rights abuses.³

★ **Enabling Public Acknowledgment**

Digital platforms allow for wide dissemination of findings, facilitating public acknowledgment of past wrongs. Rwanda's Genocide Archive, an online repository containing documents, photographs, and testimonies related to the 1994 genocide, serves both as a memorial and an educational resource, enabling Rwandans and the international community to confront this history directly.⁴

Digital Archives and Social Reconciliation

Beyond their judicial functions, digital archives play vital roles in broader social reconciliation processes:

★ **Creating Shared Historical Understanding**

By aggregating diverse perspectives and experiences, digital archives can help establish more inclusive historical narratives that acknowledge the suffering of all affected communities. The Humanitarian Law Center's Kosovo Memory Book provides a comprehensive record of all civilians, military personnel, and police officers who were killed or went missing during the Kosovo conflict, irrespective of their ethnic background. This approach challenges ethnically partisan narratives that recognize only the suffering of particular groups.⁵

★ **Facilitating Cross-Community Dialogue**

Digital archives can serve as platforms for inter-community dialogue, creating spaces where divergent experiences can be shared and acknowledged. Bosnia's 'Oral History Initiative'

² Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, "Digital Evidence Preservation," Annual Report 2024 (Washington, DC: SJAC, 2024), 18-22.

³ Elizabeth Oglesby, "Historical Memory and the Limits of Peace Education: Examining Guatemala's 'Memory of Silence' and the Politics of Curriculum Design," in *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation*, ed. Elizabeth A. Cole (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 175-202.

⁴ Jean-Damascène Gasanabo, "Digital Memorialization and Collective Memory in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Journal of Peace Research* 61, no. 2 (2024): 228-243.

⁵ Humanitarian Law Center, Kosovo Memory Book Database: January 1998-December 2000 (Belgrade: HLC, 2023), accessed April 15, 2025, <http://www.kosovomemorybook.org>.

digitally preserves testimonies from all ethnic communities affected by the Balkan conflicts, facilitating mutual recognition of suffering across previously insurmountable divides.⁶

★ **Empowering Marginalized Voices**

Digital technologies enable the inclusion of perspectives that might otherwise be excluded from official narratives, particularly those of women, minorities, and other marginalized groups. Colombia's Center for Historical Memory has established specialized digital collections focusing on the experiences of indigenous communities, Afro-Colombians, and women during the country's protracted civil conflict, challenging the dominance of mainstream narratives that often overlook these experiences.⁷

The Contested Nature of Digital Archives



Source : Library & Information Science Academic Blog

Despite their potential contributions to justice and reconciliation, digital archives are not neutral repositories of facts. They are inherently selective, reflecting both conscious decisions about what to preserve and technical constraints that privilege certain forms of documentation over others. Several critical tensions characterize these repositories:

★ **Selection and Curation Challenges**

Every archive embodies decisions about what to include, how to categorize information, and which materials to prioritize. These choices inevitably reflect particular perspectives and priorities, raising questions about representation and potential bias. The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), which maintains extensive digital archives related to the Khmer

⁶ Selma Leydesdorff, "Oral History in Bosnia: Recording Memories Across Ethnic Boundaries," *Memory Studies* 17, no. 3 (2024): 312-328.

⁷ Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Voces Plurales: Archivos Digitales de Grupos Marginados en el Conflicto Colombiano* (Bogotá: CNMH, 2023).

Rouge period, has faced ongoing questions about how to balance documentation of perpetrator accounts with victim testimonies, and how to address competing interpretations of certain historical episodes.⁸

★ Technical Challenges and Digital Divides

Digital archives require technological infrastructure, expertise, and resources that may be unevenly distributed, particularly in post-conflict settings where physical infrastructure might be damaged. This creates potential inequities in who can contribute to and access these repositories. In South Sudan, efforts to establish comprehensive digital documentation of human rights abuses have been hampered by limited internet connectivity, frequent power outages, and restricted technological capacity - challenges that risk producing incomplete or skewed historical records.⁹

★ Verification and Authentication Issues

The ease of digital manipulation raises complex questions about the authenticity and reliability of digitally preserved materials. Developing robust verification protocols is essential but challenging, particularly in contexts where technical expertise may be limited. The Bellingcat investigative collective's work on the Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts demonstrates both the potential and the challenges of digital verification, using sophisticated techniques to authenticate user-generated content while contending with increasingly sophisticated forms of digital manipulation.¹⁰

Case Studies: Digital Archives in Action

★ The Bangladesh World War II Digital Memory Project

The often-overlooked contributions of Bengali soldiers who fought in World War II highlight another crucial dimension of digital archives: their capacity to recover marginalized histories that have been systematically excluded from dominant historical narratives. An estimated 2.5 million soldiers from undivided Bengal served in various theaters of World War II, yet their stories remained largely absent from both colonial histories and subsequent national narratives of Bangladesh and India.¹¹

⁸ Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022), 87-92.

⁹ Jennifer Easterday and Jessica Dorsey, "Digital Divides and Transitional Justice: Documentation Challenges in Resource-Limited Settings," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 17, no. 1 (2023): 52-71.

¹⁰ Sam Dubberley, Alexa Koenig, and Daragh Murray, eds., *Digital Witness: Using Open Source Information for Human Rights Investigation, Documentation, and Accountability*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

¹¹ Sarmila Bose, "Remembering Bengali Soldiers in World War II: Digital Recovery of a Forgotten Legacy," *South Asian History and Culture* 15, no. 1 (2024): 75-91.

The Bangladesh World War II Digital Memory Project, launched in 2018, has collected oral histories, personal correspondence, photographs, and military records related to Bengali participation in the war. These materials reveal complex motivations for enlistment, varied war experiences, and the significant impact of military service on subsequent independence movements. The digitization of a collection of letters written by Abdul Haque, a Bengali soldier who served in Burma and Italy, provides particular insight into the psychological toll of fighting for a colonial power while harboring aspirations for independence.¹²

This digital archive has transformed understanding of Bangladesh's complex relationship with World War II memory. By preserving testimonies that might otherwise have been lost as the last generation of veterans passes away, the archive challenges both colonial erasure and nationalist simplifications. The project's interactive digital map, which tracks Bengali soldiers' deployments across global war theaters, visually represents their overlooked global contributions while connecting local histories to international narratives.¹³

The project exemplifies how digital archives can recover subordinated memories that challenge dominant historical narratives. As historian Yasmin Khan notes, "These digital collections fundamentally alter our understanding of World War II as a truly global conflict in which colonial subjects played pivotal but unrecognized roles."¹⁴ Moreover, the archive's educational outreach program has integrated these recovered histories into Bangladeshi school curricula, ensuring that younger generations recognize these complex historical legacies.

★ The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam)

Following the Khmer Rouge genocide (1975-1979), Cambodia faced the monumental task of documenting atrocities that claimed nearly two million lives. The Documentation Center of Cambodia has digitized over one million documents, photographs, and audiovisual materials related to this period. These materials have supported prosecutions at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) while also serving educational purposes through public exhibitions and curriculum development.

DC-Cam's digital archives proved crucial in the successful prosecution of senior Khmer Rouge officials, including Kaing Guek Eav (alias 'Duch'), the former commander of the notorious S-21 prison. The meticulously preserved prison records, photographs, and confessions provided

¹² Afsan Chowdhury, "Letters from War: The Abdul Haque Collection and Bengali Military Experience in World War II," *The Journal of Military History* 88, no. 3 (2024): 765-787.

¹³ Bangladesh World War II Digital Memory Project, "Interactive Deployment Map of Bengali Soldiers 1939-1945," accessed April 20, 2025, <http://www.bengaliww2archives.org.bd/map>.

¹⁴ Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at War: A People's History of India's Second World War* (London: Bodley Head, 2023), 312.

irrefutable evidence of systematic torture and execution.¹⁵ Beyond their legal utility, these archives have enabled younger generations of Cambodians to engage with this difficult history, challenging the culture of silence that long surrounded the Khmer Rouge period.¹⁶

★ The Syrian Archive

As the Syrian conflict continues, multiple initiatives have emerged to document potential war crimes and human rights violations. The Syrian Archive, a collaborative digital initiative, has preserved over 3.5 million digital items related to the conflict, focusing particularly on incidents involving chemical weapons, attacks on medical facilities, and other serious violations of international humanitarian law.¹⁷

This archive exemplifies both the potential and challenges of contemporary digital documentation. On one hand, it has preserved crucial evidence that might otherwise have been lost, particularly as social media companies remove content that violates their terms of service. On the other hand, the Syrian Archive must contend with active disinformation campaigns, digital manipulation, and competing narratives about responsibility for documented atrocities. The initiative has developed sophisticated verification protocols, collaborating with international experts to authenticate digital materials while maintaining rigorous documentation standards.

★ Colombia's Memory Bank

Colombia's protracted internal conflict, spanning over five decades, has generated complex challenges for historical memory and reconciliation. The National Center for Historical Memory has established a digital Memory Bank containing testimonies, documents, and multimedia materials related to the conflict. This digital repository has played a crucial role in Colombia's ongoing peace process, supporting the work of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) while also facilitating broader societal engagement with the conflict's legacy.

The Memory Bank's innovative 'Voices of Memory' project digitally preserves testimonies from victims across Colombia's diverse regions and communities, ensuring that historically marginalized voices- including indigenous communities, Afro-Colombians, and rural populations - are represented in the national historical narrative.¹⁸ These materials have

¹⁵ Peter Maguire, *Facing Death in Cambodia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 156-178.

¹⁶ Savina Sirik, "Digital Archives and Education in Post-Conflict Cambodia," *Journal of Peace Education* 21, no. 2 (2024): 217-233.

¹⁷ Jeff Deutch and Hadi Al Khatib, "The Syrian Archive: Preserving Evidence of War Crimes in the Digital Age," *International Review of the Red Cross* 106, no. 1 (2024): 83-101.

¹⁸ María Emma Wills, "Digital Storytelling and Historical Memory in Colombia's Transitional Justice Process," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 18, no. 2 (2024): 340-359.

informed reparations programs, contributed to truth-telling initiatives, and supported educational efforts aimed at preventing recurrence of violence.¹⁹

Future Trajectories: Emerging Technologies and New Challenges

As technology continues to evolve, so too will the nature and capabilities of digital archives in post-conflict settings. Several emerging developments warrant particular attention:

★ Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning

AI technologies are increasingly being applied to process and analyze massive datasets within digital archives. These tools can identify patterns, detect inconsistencies, and establish connections that might elude human analysts. The Human Rights Data Analysis Group has pioneered the use of statistical methods and machine learning to analyze patterns of violence in conflicts from Syria to Guatemala, helping to establish the systematic nature of certain violations and contributing to accountability efforts.²⁰

However, these technologies also introduce new forms of potential bias and opacity into archival processes. The algorithms that drive AI systems reflect the data on which they are trained, potentially reproducing or amplifying existing prejudices and blind spots. Ensuring transparency and ethical application of these technologies remains a critical challenge.

★ Blockchain and Distributed Ledger Technologies

Blockchain and other distributed ledger technologies offer promising approaches to authentication and preservation challenges. By creating immutable, time-stamped records that cannot be retroactively altered, these technologies could strengthen the evidentiary value of digitally preserved materials. The Syrian Archive has begun exploring blockchain applications to establish chains of custody for sensitive digital evidence, potentially addressing concerns about tampering or manipulation.²¹

★ Virtual and Augmented Reality

Emerging immersive technologies offer new possibilities for engaging with historical memory. Virtual reconstructions of destroyed cultural heritage sites, immersive experiences of historical events, and interactive testimonial archives could transform how societies engage with difficult pasts. Colombia's Museum of Memory has developed virtual reality experiences based on

¹⁹ Gabriel Ruiz-Romero and María José Pizarro, "Colombia's Memory Bank: Digital Archives as Reparation," *Memory Studies* 17, no. 4 (2024): 512-527.

²⁰ Patrick Ball and Megan Price, "Big Data, Selection Bias, and the Statistical Patterns of Mortality in Conflict," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 44, no. 1 (2024): 10-27.

²¹ Enrico Bertini and Jeffrey Deutch, "Blockchain Technology for Digital Evidence Preservation in Conflict Settings," *Digital Investigation: The International Journal of Digital Forensics & Incident Response* 38 (2024): 301038.

victim testimonies, allowing users to engage with these narratives in more immediate and emotionally resonant ways.²²

Ethical Considerations and Best Practices

As digital archiving practices continue to evolve, several ethical principles should guide their development:

★ Do No Harm

Archives must prioritize the safety and dignity of those whose experiences they document. This requires robust protocols for informed consent, anonymization where appropriate, and careful consideration of potential risks to contributors.

★ Inclusivity and Representativeness

Archives should actively seek to incorporate diverse perspectives, particularly from marginalized communities whose experiences might otherwise be overlooked. This requires proactive engagement strategies and recognition of barriers to participation.

★ Transparency About Limitations

No archive can capture the full complexity of a conflict. Archivists should be transparent about their methodological choices, technical constraints, and potential blind spots, acknowledging the inherently partial nature of all documentation efforts.

★ Sustainable Access and Preservation

Long-term preservation requires sustainable funding, technological adaptability, and institutional commitment. Archives must develop strategies for ensuring continued accessibility despite evolving technological landscapes and potential political pressures.

Conclusion

Digital archives represent powerful tools for confronting difficult pasts and building more just futures in post-conflict settings. They can preserve crucial evidence, amplify marginalized voices, challenge false narratives, and support diverse transitional justice mechanisms. However, they also embody complex tensions between inclusion and selectivity, accessibility and security, neutrality and advocacy.

The most effective digital archives navigate these tensions thoughtfully, recognizing both the transformative potential and the inherent limitations of digital documentation. They complement rather than replace other memory practices, working alongside oral history

²² Alejandra Gaviria-Serna, "Virtual Reality as Witness: Immersive Technologies in Colombia's Museum of Memory," *Visual Communication Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2025): 31-44.

traditions, physical memorials, educational initiatives, and other approaches to historical reckoning.

As societies continue to develop more sophisticated approaches to addressing legacies of violence and repression, digital archives will remain critical battlegrounds in ongoing contests over historical truth. Their evolution will both reflect and shape how communities remember difficult pasts, assign responsibility for historical wrongs, and imagine more peaceful futures. By understanding both the promise and the politics of these digital repositories, we can better harness their potential to support justice, reconciliation, and sustainable peace.