OXFORD

'Irreversible': The Role of Digitization to Repurpose State Records of Repression

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ABSTRACT[∞]

Since mid-2005, archivist–activists at the Historical Archive of the National Police of Guatemala have been digitizing a century's worth of previously suppressed police records so as to protect, mobilize and provide access to them – 23 million pages to date. We find that digitization amplified the staff's repurposing of the archive to serve victims of human rights violations. Digitization enhances short- and long-term safeguards for the archive's physical integrity, probative value and enduring accessibility, but has required critical human factors and institutional solidarity, most notably partnerships with international donors and allied organizations, and Guatemalan nongovernmental organizations. Finally, technology offers a lens to analyze the persistent challenges to promoting truth and justice in Guatemala. We show how simple, often ad hoc approaches to digitization developed under political urgency can have an irreversible impact when used to amplify a unified mission driven by a committed community of archival workers.

KEYWORDS: digitization, access to information, technology, archives, Guatemala

INTRODUCTION

In July 2005, when the Guatemalan Human Rights Ombudsman's Office fortuitously found the overwhelming cache of records of the former National Police (*Policía Nacional*, or PN) sprawled across seven warehouses in Guatemala City in deplorable condition, one of the first major investments was purchasing computers and a fleet

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of scanners. Unsure of how long the human rights community would have custody over the records of this former state security agency, which had historically been heavily involved in surveillance and repression, the archivists saw digitization as a way to secure the information contained in the fragile papers and to make access to these documents by civil society 'irreversible.'[1]

In the 13 years since its discovery, with indispensable support from many international allies and in a postconflict context with powerful interests on the side of impunity, a committed group of people in Guatemala have turned what is now known as the Historical Archive of the National Police (*Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional*, or AHPN) 'from a terror archive into a people's archive.'[2] This has involved the conservation, organization and description of 80 million pages of documents ranging from reports, to orders, memos, surveillance logs and summaries of PN activities, written by police agents at all ranks. To date, 23 million of those pages have been restored, archivally organized and digitized. We argue that this digitization has had an as yet underanalyzed role in the AHPN workers' ability to succeed in some of their most important transitional justice achievements.

Archival work at the AHPN, including digitization, has been motivated by three goals: to protect the records, to mobilize them for truth and accountability, and to make them available to Guatemalan citizens. The process of using digital reduplication as a protection mechanism began in 2008, when the archive partnered with the Swiss Federal Archives (SFA) to send digital copies abroad for preservation. Since then, the AHPN has extended this practice by sharing large subcollections of the archive with international and local partners domestically and abroad.

The use of metadata to authenticate digital records and the development of auxiliary databases to enhance searches in the archive have enabled AHPN staff to mobilize digital records to serve public prosecutors and community members. As of August 2018, certified digital copies of documents from the AHPN had been analyzed, submitted and accepted as probative evidence in 13 criminal trials that resulted in groundbreaking convictions – a watershed for justice in Guatemala.[3] Finally, in order to provide 'unrestricted' information to visitors, the AHPN established an Information Access Unit (*Unidad de Acceso a Información*, or UAI) in 2009. Individuals who inquire about what the police recorded about victims, or even about themselves, can take digital copies home with them to contemplate and preserve. Having the documents in digital form has expanded the ways the records have and can be used to search, triangulate, analyze and submit PN documents for legal proceedings and historical research.[4]

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1 Gustavo Meoño Brenner, AHPN coordinator from 2005 through August 2018. He believed from the start of the project that digitization was 'the only aspect of this that is irreversible.' See, Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 78. The belief that gains achieved with digitization were 'irreversible' was echoed across almost all interviews conducted with AHPN workers.

2 Weld, supra n 1 at 237.

3 These include convictions of officers involved in the burning of the Spanish Embassy in 1980, the violent abduction of Emma Molina Theissen and the forced disappearance of her brother Marco Antonio, and the pending 'Death Squad Dossier' trial into the forced disappearance of almost 200 citizens.

4 AHPN, *Del Silencio a La Memoria: Revelaciones Del Archivo Histórico de La Policía Nacional* (2011).

The AHPN staff who have led these efforts – a team which has fluctuated in size from 100 to over 200 people – have acquired highly specialized knowledge of archival best practices, Guatemalan history, PN administrative structures and operation, and the needs of diverse user groups seeking answers about the past in the police files. In this article, we describe how the AHPN team, along with international partners, has used digital technology to preserve and expand access to archival records and to facilitate truth-seeking. We draw on Kentaro Toyama's theory of the *amplifying* power of technology, which allows us to center the people – archivist–activists motivated to preserve archival records, facilitate truth-seeking and expand access to archival records – as the crucial drivers of the AHPN's impact.[5]

While digitization has amplified the work of the AHPN team and provided a safeguard against damage, we also find that it has only had a limited role in enabling meaningful access beyond the walls of the archive. The AHPN is an unusually complex digital collection because of the material conditions of the archive, the size and administrative nature of the collection, and the political conditions of its creation and preservation. The AHPN has responded to this complexity by developing a digitization model centered on human expertise, institutional alliances and personal empathy. By analyzing the AHPN's efforts to scale access at the University of Texas (UT) and through a 'regionalization' initiative, we can also appreciate the challenges of scaling up that model – so dependent on the capacities of the people driving it. In addition, by considering the AHPN's plan to bring copies to more locations throughout Guatemala – thus expanding the *possibility* of access – we also glean evidence of some resistance to facing what these records may reveal about the difficult past.

Given the contentious nature of their transitional justice work, the AHPN leadership, staff and partners have operated under a constant sense of threat. By far the most serious one came on 3 August 2018: in a series of abrupt actions, the Ministry of Culture and Sport and the UN Development Program – the agency that has administered the AHPN's international aid since the start of the project – removed Gustavo Meoño, coordinator of the AHPN since 2005, and Ana Carla Ericastilla, director of the *Archivo General de Centro América* (the Guatemalan public institution that has held direct custody over the AHPN holding since 2009), from their leadership positions.[6] Some observers and AHPN staff members believe these actions are a backlash against the AHPN for its role in securing successful convictions of former high-ranking Guatemalan officials.[7]

While writing this article, we saw further attacks on truth and justice efforts in Guatemala. For example, in September, President Jimmy Morales' government took steps to block the operation of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (*Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala*, or CICIG), the hybrid court fighting contemporary corruption.[8] This moment of institutional

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5 Kentaro Toyama, *Geek Heresy: Rescuing Social Change from the Cult of Technology* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2015).

6 Kate Doyle, ed., 'Guatemala Police Archive under Threat,' *National Security Archive*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/news/guatemala/2018-08-13/guatemala-police-archive-under-threat (accessed 7 December 2018).

7 Ibid.

8 Among his moves to block justice, Morales prohibited the reentry of the CICIG's commissioner, Iván Velásquez, into Guatemala after a work trip abroad. On 28 November 2018, Guatemala's Constitutional

precarity for the AHPN and for justice in Guatemala more broadly makes it especially timely to reflect on the history of digitization of the police records that have already proven to be so important. Our reflection hopes to inform what may be necessary to sustain the preservation, use and access of the records into the future. Beyond the case of Guatemala, we also find that the example of the AHPN offers insight into the ways that technology can amplify human rights efforts at regional and global scales, and the challenges of sustaining a human-centered approach to archival access across multiple platforms.

METHODOLOGY

This study synthesizes the three authors' experiences working in the archive with semi-structured interviews conducted by Tamy Guberek in June and July of 2018.[9] Guberek began her relationship with the AHPN in 2006 as part of the team from the Human Rights Data Analysis Group leading a sampling project of the archive's contents, and has since been a periodic user of AHPN documents for academic research. Velia Muralles led the AHPN's archival restoration team between 2006 and 2009. Since 2010, she has led the Document Analysis and Expert Testimonies work at the AHPN. She has served as the expert witness testifying to the authenticity and reliability of the documents in 13 human rights trials. Hannah Alpert-Abrams worked at UT, where she served as liaison to the AHPN and manager of the digital repository in 2017 and 2018.

Interview subjects included 10 people from across the AHPN, two people involved with the Digital AHPN at UT and 10 people from the AHPN's regional partner organizations. Interviews were analyzed to draw out main themes and specific insights provided by each interviewee. We also draw on insights about digital access from an event in Guatemala City in July 2018 celebrating the seven-year relationship between the AHPN and UT.[10]

BACKGROUND

AHPN History

During decades of military dictatorship and internal armed conflict, Guatemalans experienced one of the bloodiest dirty wars in 20th-century Latin America.[11] The Historical Clarification Commission (*La Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico*, or

Court ordered the Morales government and all migration officials to refrain from imposing on Velásquez's work in Guatemala.

9 Three colleagues supported the interview process: in July 2018, Luisa Fernanda Rivas, head of institutional relations and dissemination, contacted all participating regional organizations via email to inquire about their experiences; José Rodolfo Kepfer, former AHPN researcher, conducted two interviews at LCC in Quetzaltenango in July 2018; Alberto Fuentes, former AHPN public relations coordinator, helped coordinate and lead the interviews with colleagues from AMDE in the region of Escuintla. While Human Subjects Review was not required, we had a verbal consent discussion with all interviewees, ensuring they understood and accepted the project and agreed to be quoted. Most people expressed their appreciation for our interest and attention to their experiences.

10 Hannah Alpert-Abrams, 'Seminar Celebrates Collaboration with Guatemala on Archives and Human Rights,' https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/llilas/news/article.php?id=13049 (accessed 7 December 2018).

11 John H. Coatsworth, *Central America and the United States: The Clients and the Colossus* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994).

CEH), set up as part of the 1996 peace accords, found that 93 percent of the human rights abuses they documented were perpetrated by state forces. While the role of the military in perpetrating these abuses is well documented, surprisingly little was known about the role of the extinct PN until the police records were uncovered in 2005. Thanks to these bureaucratic records, which document daily activities from 1882 to 1996, we now understand that the institution functioned as a state security force deeply involved in counterinsurgency and repression.[12] The administrative nature of the archival documents, which include official orders, actions, procedures, decisions, activities and recordkeeping practices of the police and of many other state institutions with whom the PN regularly interacted, allows them to function as official evidence of the activities and transactions they reflect.[13]

In the postconflict period, those who benefited from the war and enjoyed power and impunity in its aftermath worked to obfuscate the existence of state records.[14] As Kirsten Weld has shown in her book about the archive,[15] in contrast, the early team of workers at the AHPN included former militants, communist and labor union members, civil society activists, and young people with family members who had been detained, tortured or disappeared during the most repressive years of the internal armed conflict. The AHPN team responsible for processing the police records balanced their human commitments with 'archival thinking.'[16] In order to preserve the value of the records as evidence – to ensure they are authentic and reliable for historical inquiry and accepted as probative in courts of law – the AHPN workers followed strict archival standards and protocols for the restoration. They also undertook renewed study of the historical, legal and normative dimensions of the PN and the Guatemalan context in which it operated.

Furthermore, the team built upon international efforts to position 'access to archives' as a centerpiece of the 'right to truth.'[17] The team prioritized documents created between 1975 and 1985 because the UN's CEH identified this as the period with the most extreme political violence during the Guatemalan internal armed

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12 Michael McClintock, *The American Connection, Vol. 2: State Terror and Popular Resistance in Guatemala* (London: Zed Books, 1985); Weld, supra n 1.

13 There is a large literature stemming back to the 1990s on preserving the integrity of electronic records. See, e.g., Luciana Duranti, Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil, *Preservation of the Integrity of Electronic Records* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2002).

14 Christian Tomuschat, 'Clarification Commission in Guatemala,' *Human Rights Quarterly* 23(2) (2001): 233–258; CEH, 'Guatemala: Memory of Silence – Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification: Conclusions and Recommendations' (1999).

15 Weld, supra n 1.

16 Similar efforts have been made to marshal archives for human rights purposes in other contexts. See, e.g., Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* (Madison, IN: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014); A. James McAdams, *Judging the Past in Unified Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

17 The efforts of human rights communities across the globe fighting for access to state records over the past three decades crystalized in the 2005 Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights through Action to Combat Impunity, known as the Joinet–Orentlicher Principles. They include government obligations to preserve archives and make them available for accountability and collective memory. See, John D. Ciorciari, 'Archiving Memory after Mass Atrocities,' Rapoport Center Human Rights Working Paper Series 4/2012.

conflict. PN records from this period were considered priority human rights evidence for criminal justice, historical research and individual truth-seeking. The work of transforming the records into human rights evidence also served the goals of the archive's international advisors, allies and donors, who supported the AHPN for its relevance for transitional justice in Guatemala.[18]

Theoretical Framework

Much of the literature at the intersection of technology and human rights highlights one main promise of what technology can deliver for human rights evidence: copies.[19] The belief that copies can serve as a digital backup for cultural memory is widespread, and archival institutions working with human rights and social justice records under a post-custodial model have identified preservation as a primary motivating factor for digitization.[20] Beyond copies, human rights and archival scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of collecting appropriate metadata so that the evidence inscribed in the archive will have probative value, that is, admissibility and authentication.[21] At present, however, little time has been available to retrospectively examine the meaning and implications of digital preservation in a human rights context.

In this article, we reflect on 13 years of digitization work in a human rights archive. We draw on Toyama's 'law of amplification,' which pushes back against simplistic notions of 'technology for good' to center human forces as agents of change.[22] Toyama argues that in the context of projects that seek to use technology for social good, the role of technology is best understood as having amplified the capacities of

18 The UN Development Program's PAJUST program has administered millions of dollars in foreign aid from international governments for the AHPN since the beginning of the project. For a discussion on the extent to which international donors have underwritten the entire AHPN effort, as well as a history of international efforts to 'professionalize' archives in Guatemala going back to the 1970s, see, Weld, supra n 1. The PAJUST program is currently in its 'final stage.' See, 'Programa de Acompañamiento a La Justicia de Transición PAJUST II, Articulación y Alianzas entre Estado y Sociedad Civil para el impulso de la Justicia de Transición,' http://www.gt.undp.org/content/guatemala/es/home/projects/-programa-de-acompanamiento-a-la-justicia-de-transicion-pajust-i.html (accessed 7 December 2018).

19 Molly Land and Jay Aronson, 'The Promise and Peril of Human Rights Technology,' in *New Technologies for Human Rights Law and Practice*, ed. Molly Land and Jay Aronson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Louis Bickford, Patricia Karam, Hassan Mneimneh and Patrick Pierce, 'Documenting Truth,' International Center for Transitional Justice (2009); Kristin Antin, 'How to Digitise Your Human Rights Document Archive,' HURIDOCS, 2016, https://huridocs.org/2016/11/how-to-digitize-your-human-rights-document-archive/ (accessed 7 December 2018); Philip Alston and Sarah Knuckey, eds., *The Transformation of Human Rights Fact-Finding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

20 Emily Dreyfuss, 'Brazil's Museum Fire Proves Cultural Memory Needs a Digital Backup,' *Wired Magazine*, 2018, https://www.wired.com/story/brazil-museum-fire-digital-archives/ (accessed 7 December 2018); Christian Kelleher, 'Archives without Archives: (Re)Locating and (Re)Defining the Archive through Post-Custodial Praxis,' *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1(2) (2017): 1–30; Christian Kelleher, T-Kay Sangwand, Kevin Wood and Yves Kamuronsi, 'The Human Rights Documentation Initiative at the University of Texas Libraries,' *New Review of Information Networking* 15(2) (2010): 94–109.

21 Kathleen O'Neill, Della Sentilles and Daniel M. Brinks, 'New Wine in Old Wineskins? New Problems in the Use of Electronic Evidence in Human Rights Investigations and Prosecutions,' 2011, http://www.crl.edu/sites/default/files/d6/attachments/pages/Rapoport-E-evidencereport.pdf (accessed 7 December 2018).

22 Toyama, supra n 5. Other studies on information and communication technologies and development have echoed this theory. See, World Bank Group, *World Development Report 2016: Digital Dividends* (2016).

motivated people who leveraged it to advance their goals. Conversely, amplification also means that when there is insufficient human capacity to drive outcomes, no amount of technology in and of itself will suffice.

In the context of archives, we see in Toyama's theory of amplification an answer to the ongoing debate about the role of digitization in preservation.[23] While the short lifespans and limited capacities of digital hardware mean technology can never fully and permanently preserve a paper record, in the following section we describe the power that technology has to amplify the archivists' goal of archival protection. More broadly, as subsequent sections illustrate, we argue that digital technology has been used to amplify the urgent need to navigate and provide access to archival records, both at the AHPN and beyond. At the same time, technology requires a base of human effort to amplify, so where human resources are absent or curtailed, digitization by itself does not automatically advance transitional justice goals.

PROTECTING THE ARCHIVE

Digitization served two preservation goals at the AHPN. First, by building a digital interface to the archive, the archivists prevented damage to the paper documents caused by ordinary consultation. Second, by making duplicates of the collection and dispersing them geographically, the archive's leadership worked to ensure that the information contained in the records would survive any damage to the collection or political interventions that limited onsite access. In this section, we briefly survey the history of digitization practices at the AHPN before discussing each preservation goal in turn.

Digitization Process

Former AHPN coordinator Gustavo Meoño and the AHPN's initial leadership team considered 'making copies' to be a survival strategy given the precarious state of the records and the array of potential political adversaries that could work to obstruct access to them. Jorge Villagrán, the first coordinator of information systems, oversaw an assembly-line workstyle for manual digitization work using eight Kodak scanners.[24] Digitization became the last step in a sequence of archival processes that includes cleaning, organizing and documenting each record, and that is still in practice today. Over the first six years of operation, resources allowed for two full daily shifts of digitization work to keep pace with the work of hundreds of other staff members advancing the archival process. More recently, with declines in funds and state support, the digitization effort has been reduced to one shift per day.

During the first six months, the team digitized about 300,000 images without documenting any associated metadata. It soon became clear, however, that metadata would be necessary to preserve the evidentiary value of the digital records and to

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23   For a survey of the debate, see, Karen F. Gracy and Miriam B. Kahn, 'Preservation in the Digital Age,' *Library Resources and Technical Services* 56(1) (2012): 25–43; Trevor Owens, *The Theory and Craft of Digital Preservation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

24   Personal interview, Jorge Villagrán, former AHPN head of information systems, Guatemala City, 23 July 2018; personal interview, Angel Lone Ayala, current head of information systems, Guatemala City, 24 July 2018. Images are created in 300 DPI resolution and in .tiff format. They are saved on one primary server and mirrored on a second. After intensive use, six of the scanners were replaced in 2012.

link them to the original documents they represent. The team now uses Total Image (TI), a database system designed in Guatemala, to manage technical and descriptive metadata. The TI database has been customized to capture and store the document provenance that the archival team establishes – fond, sub-fond, series, box and bundle number, date range and three or four descriptive terms. It also includes image creation data and assigns each image its digital unique identifier (called the *Código Único de Inventario de Total Image*).[25]

Over the years, there have been few changes or upgrades to the initial technology acquisition. With only a one-time upgrade of server processing capacity, Angel Lone Ayala, the current head of information systems, has generally considered the functionality of the TI database to be stable and sufficient. To date, the digital repository has grown to over 18 terabytes of data and contains approximately 23 million pages of records.

Physical/Digital Link

Early workers in the archive encountered popsicle stick-like markers among the files, evidence that during ordinary use of the archive, records had been removed but never returned. Digitization had the potential to protect the archives from these kinds of accidental – or intentional – losses, but only if users would accept a digital record as a legitimate substitute for the physical copy. To guarantee the authenticity of the documents, the AHPN developed a metadata strategy that would establish the chain of custody and lead a holder of a digital copy to the exact location where the physical document lives.

It was also necessary for the AHPN to campaign to validate their approach. They developed a custody manual to demonstrate to judicial authorities their mutual interest in avoiding document seizure.[26] Together with nongovernmental organizations, they conducted workshops with judges, prosecutors and lawyers to raise awareness about the concerns with judicial sequester and to demonstrate how digital images could be a viable solution. They argued that digital copies should be accepted as probative, and that physical copies were best kept at the AHPN collection, where their chain of custody could be controlled and where they could be viewed permanently by any entity.

The strategy of the AHPN proved to be a successful initiative to use digitization to avoid judicial sequester and protect the integrity of the archive. In the prosecution of former police agents for the disappearance of Edgar Fernando García, no physical documents entered the courtroom; 667 certified documents were explicitly 'granted probative value.'[27] The certification of the physical/digital link is provided by the director of the *Archivo General de Centro América*, the institution legally obligated to ensure custody and accessibility of the original documents.[28] The Guatemalan court

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25 Personal interview, Angel Lone Ayala, Guatemala City, 24 July 2018.

26 Illustrative of how digital archive practices were envisioned through a transitional justice frame, this typical archival manual was funded by Spanish funds earmarked specifically for 'Fighting Impunity in Central America and Transitional Justice.'

27 García was detained on 18 February 1984 in a monitoring operation carried out by the PN. His fate remains unknown.

28 This function is currently in jeopardy since the removal of Ericastilla from AHPN oversight. Archiveros sin Fronteras, 'Declaración sobre la situación del Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional de Guatemala

verdict and sentence for the police officers found guilty in García's disappearance states: 'there existed no doubt about the veracity and the existence of the documents.'[29]

Digital Reduplication

Duplication and redundancy via trusted organizations is generally considered to be the most prudent strategy for securing fragile digital information.[30] The AHPN understood this early on – although their priority was less to protect the records from digital threats and more to protect them from political ones.[31] They drew upon and created important international relationships with institutions that could keep copies of the digital repository outside of the country.

The first such relationship was with the SFA. In July 2008, the SFA agreed to keep copies of the digitized collection and committed not only to keeping backups of the digital records, but also to providing the technical requisites for long-term digital preservation.[32] Since then, Lone Ayala periodically transfers a full, up-to-date copy of the digital repository onto external hard drives, then delivers it for safekeeping to the SFA through the courier system of the Swiss Embassy in Guatemala City.

In December 2010, a second partnership was established between Meoño at the AHPN and UT at Austin.[33] Meoño and the human rights community were concerned about potential risks to the AHPN on the horizon of Guatemalan politics. The frontrunner in the polls for the next year's presidential election was Otto Pérez Molina, who had been a prominent military commander in counterinsurgency campaigns in the early 1980s, and later represented the military in the 1996 peace accords. In response, in early 2011 the AHPN signed a memorandum of understanding with UT intended to draw public attention to the archive and share resources across the institutions. As part of this commitment, UT agreed to maintain a copy of the digitized records and their associated metadata for safekeeping. As Theresa Polk

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(AHPN) tras la decisión del Ministerio de Cultura y el Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, (PNUD Guatemala) de que sea este último organismo el que gestione las consultorías de apoyo al AHPN' (2018).

29 Proceso Penal Número C-01069-1997-00001 Oficial Tercero. Sentencia de fecha 28 de octubre de 2010 dictada por el Tribunal Octavo de Sentencia Penal, Narcoactividad y Delitos contra el Ambiente del Departamento de Guatemala.

30 John Garrett and Donald Waters, 'Preserving Digital Information,' Report of the Task Force on Archiving of Digital Information (1996).

31 Digital threats became more of a concern in 2016, when a ransomware infection entered a local computer and began encrypting all the machines' files. After three weeks of panic and a pause in the digitization work, they were relieved to find the digital repository had not been infected by the virus. Lacking resources to invest in high-tech internet security solutions, the systems administrator opted for a low-tech workaround. They created two networks – an unplugged internal network with access to the digital repository and a separate network connected to the internet. In the event that files must be transferred from the unplugged to the plugged network, only one centrally controlled and protected USB drive can be used for the operation. While at times inconvenient, staff members have come to accept this as a necessary arrangement to mitigate digital security threats.

32 Antonio González Quintana, 'Archival Policies in the Protection of Human Rights,' 2009, https://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/Report_Gonzalez-Quintana_EN.pdf (accessed 7 December 2018).

33 The formal partnership was between the AHPN, the Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice, the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies and the UT Libraries.

explained, the digital copy would 'provide a dissuasive counter-balance to anything political done against the physical or digital collection in Guatemala.'[34]

The preservation process at UT has changed over time. In addition to storing the hard drives sent by the AHPN, the original 2011 delivery of some 11 million images was copied onto a remote server as part of an ambitious plan to provide online access to the records (discussed later). Subsequent deliveries are loaded on portable hard drives and sent to UT on an ad hoc basis, usually when the AHPN has perceived some political vulnerability on the horizon. These have usually been delivered in co-ordination with UT researchers or students traveling between Austin and Guatemala City and willing to fly with a few hard drives in their hand luggage.

Hard drives have limited shelf lives, however, and it became apparent that a more secure preservation strategy was necessary. In 2017, David Bliss, the digital processing archivist at LLILAS Benson, initiated a preservation process that would write the entire collection (about 7.5TB of data) to magnetic tapes for long-term storage. These tapes have a longer lifespan than hard drives, do not rely on internal motors and are stored in an environmentally secure facility; they will nevertheless need to be refreshed periodically to ensure they remain usable. Bliss has since developed a method for efficiently updating the preservation tapes with each new delivery.[35]

Reduplication and redundancy of digital information has enabled what several AHPN affiliates describe as an 'irreversible' process of information preservation. This is further supported by initiatives designed to use the digital copies as a pathway to dissemination through global as well as local alliances. The effort to 'regionalize' the AHPN – to share copies of subcollections of the AHPN with local Guatemalan organizations – was also largely driven by the logic of putting redundant copies of the AHPN documents deep in Guatemalan communities so they have increased chances of survival and use. Ultimately, these projects all share a single mission. As Alberto Fuentes said, 'Whatever happens, a copy of this information is out there and can continue being used forever.'[36]

MOBILIZING THE RECORDS FOR TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

While the primary concern of the AHPN has been protecting the archival records from harm and obstruction, the work of processing and digitizing the records was part of the larger mission to provide access to the information in the archive. In this section, we examine the ways that the AHPN has enabled access to the content of the records, both by developing auxiliary search tools and through the in-house public access unit. We argue that the technology amplified the ability and degree to which the archive staff was able to make these records of repression serve in-house and external users seeking historical justice.

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34   Video conference, Theresa Polk, director of digital collection, UT Libraries, 6 July 2018.
35   Thanks to David Bliss for reviewing this information.
36   Written correspondence, Alberto Fuentes, former AHPN public relations coordinator, and Gustavo Meoño, then AHPN coordinator, 30 June 2018.

Building and Using Auxiliary Resources

It may seem to go without saying that searching the massive collection in digital form is easier than searching in physical boxes and paper, but even a digital search of the AHPN is extremely complex. At the core of the difficulty is the incredible scale of the collection. Because processing speed has been considered more important than the generation of detailed metadata, the digitization process has provided little more than each record's provenance information and a small number of descriptive terms. The possibility of using optical character recognition (OCR) to convert the documents to machine-readable text was evaluated early on but discarded, as the OCR capabilities at the time did not offer reliable character recognition for documents of this kind. Furthermore, attempting OCR would have slowed the process down significantly and required additional storage space. The lack of OCR means the documents are not text-searchable, and the limited provenance metadata does not get researchers far enough.

In response to this challenge, Villagrán developed supplementary resources to aid in the search process. Using off-the-shelf tools like Microsoft Access and Excel, AHPN staff members created indices listing names of people – for example, citizens or police agents – and linking them to the unique digital records identifier in the main TI digital repository. This was soon supplemented by a database known as the *base maestra* (master database), which records any tags, annotations or thematic information collected by the archivists as they process documents. Created initially in response to the real-time need to store information collected by 200 staff members, and lacking standardization, the database has since come to serve as the centralized repository of knowledge that the AHPN staff have collectively accumulated from millions of documents. Beyond storage, it also now plays an indispensable role in the AHPN's in-house research processes for reports and criminal case submissions and for responding to access requests from individuals and external partners.

To understand how the supplementary databases enable the AHPN to respond to queries, it is helpful to review the process of search and discovery of 667 documents submitted as legal evidence for the forced disappearance case of Edgar Fernando García – all needles in the monumental haystack. The Public Ministry required the AHPN to: provide records related to the PN 'cleansing' operation that took place on the day, at the place and time García was last seen; 'establish the provenance, authenticity and reliability' of those case-specific documents; and 'determine the organizational structure of the [PN] units linked to all the documents submitted' in the case.[37] Since the archive (physical and digital) is not organized thematically but according to original order, locating the disparate documents across 11 PN units (fonds) required deep knowledge of the functions, jurisdiction, activities and recordkeeping practices of each unit and nested subunits. But it also required the tools to make searching the massive archive tenable. For example, the five *fichas* (identity cards) included in the case file were drawn from a series containing 928,555. Finding those documents would have been extremely time consuming without the supplementary metadata recording the name associated with each *ficha* (Figure 1). These cards reference many other related yet potentially buried documents in the massive series.

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37 Formal request from the Public Ministry MP001/2006/70307/RL, Special Human Rights Investigations Unit.

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APELLIDOS GARCIA
NOMBRES Edgar Fernando
DIRECCION

FECHA	NUMERO	CARPETA	ASUNTO
7-7-84. yg	347	Recursos Exhibición	e informa que éste. no se encuentra detenido en este Dpto.
25-9-84 aab	1127	Direc.Gral.Pol.Nac.	Se informa a la direc.Gral. del Ramo lo investigado con el paradero de ést
26-10-84 aab	1307	Direc.Gral.Pol.Nac.	Se informa a la Direc.Gral. del Ramo lo investigado ala desaparición de – éste.
17-4-85 mems	387	Direc.Gral.Pol.Nac.	Se informa a la Direc.Gral. del Ramo que actualmente se encuentra en proceso l ainvestigación sobre la desaparición de éste.
37-85 ivdeM.	144	Recursos de Exhibición	Se informa que éste, no ha sido consignado

FECHA	NUMERO	CARPETA	ASUNTO
			por elementos de este Depto. según consta en los Archivos correspondientes.
10-8-85 luc.	170	Recursos de Exhibicion	Se informa á Juez 6to. de 1ra. Instancia Penal, que no ha sido detenido ni consignado por elementos de éste Depto.
17-9-85 amg.	42	Minist. Fianzas Public.	Se solicita A; Reg. de vehículos de MINI-FIN PUB, proporcione dirección de este.
4-10-85 luc	151	Derecciones Generales	Se solicita a los Jefes de Pantallas del registro de vehículos, propiedad de inmueble y del impuesto del valor agragado IVA. Se sirvan proporcionar a éste Departamento la dirección de éste.

G. 24518-20M-8-84/T.   TIP. NACIONAL—GUATEMALA
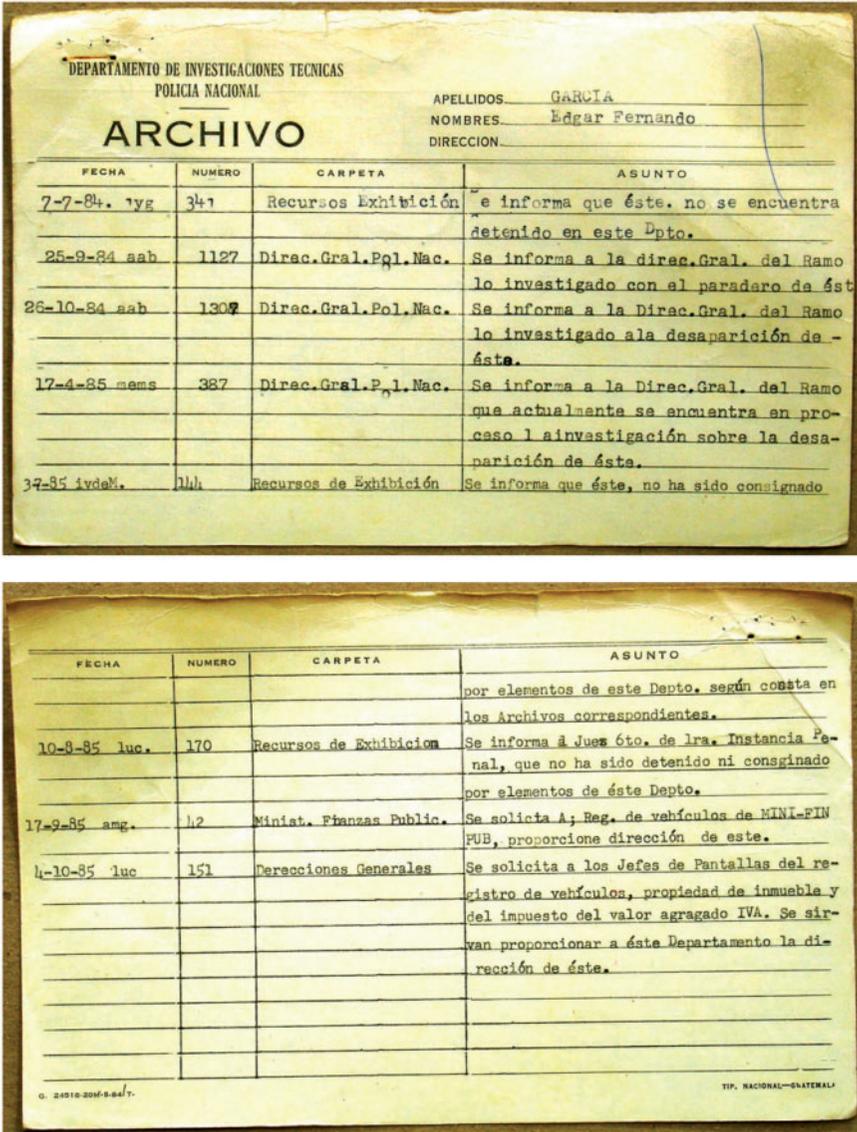
Figure 1. PN *ficha* for Edgar Fernando García

Combining their expertise and using their various digital tools, researchers were able to pull up and contrast trusted digital records, following the paper trail in digital form of the police's long-term surveillance of García and their elaboration of the 'cleansing' operation in which he was ultimately captured and then never seen again.[38]

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38   Kate Doyle, "'I Wanted Him Back Alive." An Account of Edgar Fernando García's Case from inside "Tribunals Tower",' 2010, https://unredacted.com/2010/10/26/i-wanted-him-back-alive-%E2%80%9D-an-account-of-edgar-fernando-garcias-case-from-inside-tribunals-tower/ (accessed 8 December 2018).

They were also able to tag and annotate their process in the *base maestra*, which remains their institutional memory and the repository of their acquired knowledge.

While AHPN power users – researchers and the access unit staff – concede that the various tools could be more user-friendly, they emphasize their tremendous value in making searching tenable and enabling the AHPN to advance their various goals. In 10 years and with limited resources, the AHPN archivist–activists have studied overlapping documents to submit as documentary evidence in simultaneous criminal trials resulting in 13 convictions for human rights violations to date, produced numerous historical reports, and responded to thousands of individual requests for PN information. As the AHPN staff expressed unanimously in interviews, simultaneous progress would have been 'impossible' in such a short timespan without the trusted tools.

AHPN Information Access Unit

Article 24 of the 2008 Guatemalan Law on Free Access to Information established that no information possibly related to human rights violations can be subjected to censorship, restriction, reserve or negation. Soon after the law's passage, in 2009 – only four years after the discovery of the mounds of paper – the AHPN team had advanced the archival restoration and digitization process to the point where they could open the AHPN to public access. The first version of a public access unit was opened in March – the Reference Service on Human Rights Violations (*Servicio de Referencias sobre Violaciones a los Derechos Humanos*). After overcoming a series of political obstacles and moving to their new institutional home at the *Archivo General de Centro América*, the AHPN leadership immediately broadened this to full public access via the UAI.[39]

The UAI at the AHPN's physical location in Guatemala City is today the center of gravity for all document requests. The office receives all kinds of visitors: the most common requests come from the Public Ministry, then from individuals inquiring about disappeared family members or seeking information about what the PN may have recorded about them. Other visitors are former police agents who, for example, need to get proof of employment in order to solicit pensions. Civil society organizations and academic researchers also regularly submit information requests.[40]

Visitors have the option of sitting at a UAI computer and browsing the TI digital repository. But, as noted, searching the massive archive is difficult. Many individuals opt for a more accompanied process. To begin a search, UAI staff request three key pieces of information: names, dates and locations related to the events of interest. They conduct searches based on their existing holistic knowledge of the archive, switching with agility between TI database and the various in-house auxiliary tools

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39 The decision to provide 'unrestricted' access came after polemic debates about the privacy and security implications of making the archive accessible. In the AHPN leadership's view, the unparalleled magnitude of the violence and repression inflicted upon Guatemala, and the role of the PN in that experience, meant that the entire contents of the archive could be either directly or indirectly related to human rights violations and, thus, must be available for truth-seeking. Discussion of this tension is beyond the scope of this article.

40 The UAI keeps monthly reports on information requests by type of requester at http://archivo historicopn.org/pages/inicio/informes-cuantitativos—unidad-de-acceso-ainformacion.php (accessed 8 December 2018).

they have built to enhance searching. The UAI often draws on the innate knowledge of many people on the team. Guatemalan law requires responses to all official document requests within 10 days.[41]

Human-mediated access at the UAI goes far beyond searching, finding and delivering document requests. User-relations staff are uniquely sensitive to the emotional and potentially traumatizing experience that can come from finding – or not finding – a document.[42] Indeed, many of them have gone through the same experience of searching for police information related to their own pasts. It is common for UAI visitors to begin their search by talking with an AHPN user-relations staff member – a person who will accompany them throughout the whole process.[43]

People ask hard questions, such as: 'I'm looking for my uncle who disappeared in the 1980s. Where was he kidnapped? For how long? Where is his body?' Some people just want to have evidence that although their relative was disappeared, he or she did not have any formal criminal record. The staff work with great sensitivity with such visitors, establishing trust and good communication. A large part of their work consists of carefully managing expectations. They explain that while the administrative records in the AHPN will likely not contain specific answers to such questions, there may be documents, like a *ficha*, which could hold traces of whether a person had been detained or a request of *habeas corpus* submitted. They can also search for whether there is evidence that the police were present or carried out an operation at the place, date and time of a disappearance event.

The same staff member usually accompanies a user throughout the document search process, possibly asking clarification questions, and then sitting with users as they receive a CD with digital images of retrieved documents. In some cases, people prefer to sit with a UAI staff member to view the records. The Community Team for Psycho-Social Accompaniment, an organization specializing in providing support to families of victims, has offered training to UAI staff, and also takes on special cases for longer-term support when desired.

The emotional impact of receiving a copy of a police-created record in relation to a victim is hard to capture. As the UAI staff recount, many families have not had a single piece of information about a disappeared relative for 30 or 40 years. Receiving copies of records that include photographs from the past can be especially difficult. The AHPN's former coordinator of public relations remembers one story of a woman who came looking for information about her disappeared son in the early days of the UAI:

> When she saw the document, tears swelled up in her eyes. She told us how she
> had been received with contempt, scoffing and recusal in all the other state

41   Guatemalan Law on Free Access to Information, Decree 57-2008, art. 42.
42   On trust as an important dimension of the reference archivist's job, see, Ciaran B. Trace, 'For Love of the Game: An Ethnographic Analysis of Archival Reference Work,' *Archives and Manuscripts* 34(1) (2006): 124–143. The AHPN experience resonates with Punzalan and Caswell's call to see the relationship between reference archivists and users of human rights archives as one of 'radical empathy.' See, Ricardo L. Punzalan and Michelle Caswell, 'Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice,' *Library Quarterly* 86(1) (2016): 25–42.
43   Personal interview, Gabriel Guzmán, UAI coordinator of user relations, Guatemala City, 24 July 2018.

institutions where she had previously tried to search for information about her son. She told us this was [the] first time she had been treated with respect...With joy, and in the midst of her sobbing, she said that this document was proof that her son had truly existed, that he had actually been a person, a human being who had not only been snatched forever but whose existence they had even tried to deny. As she kissed the copy of the document, she said that her tireless search as a mother was absolutely valid and that nothing would hold her back from continuing to search for him while she had strength.[44]

Countless anecdotes reaffirm the importance of being able to search for, find, make copies, share and accompany people as they receive information related to people and past events. In the UAI visitors' book, one user wrote that coming to the AHPN was the closest she would get to visiting her brother's tomb. Communication technologies also enable UAI staff to extend support beyond their premises. Technology has amplified access via search and geographic reach, although meaningful access has offered a wider and more complex set of services, and has fundamentally depended on the AHPN staff's knowledge and empathy. User-relations staff emphasize that the most gratifying feedback they receive is from visitors who thank them for having listened and treated them with dignity as they pursued emotional quests for information.[45]

ACCESS BEYOND THE AHPN

The primary intention behind digitizing the AHPN records was to protect them through duplication and decentralization. With digitization, however, came new possibilities for dissemination. The archivists were interested in democratizing the archive by creating virtual portals so that the AHPN records could be accessed away from the capital city. In this section, we examine the development of a web-based portal in collaboration with UT Austin, and the distribution of subcollections of the archive to regional partners across Guatemala. In both cases, we begin by describing the history of the project in relation to two main goals: decentralization and democratization. We then consider some of the challenges that these projects have faced, including the size and complexity of the collection, institutional challenges and political barriers, emphasizing how technology amplifies both strengths and limits within partner institutions. Finally, we show how these cases offer a window into some of the local realities of truth-seeking at the interface of people and technology.

Digital AHPN and the Web Portal at UT

The original commitment made between UT and the AHPN in 2010 did not guarantee online access to the digital collection, but instead prioritized preservation and solidarity. Online access nevertheless became a priority for UT. In late 2011, they

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44 Written correspondence, Alberto Fuentes and Gustavo Meoño, 30 June 2018.
45 Personal interview, Gabriel Guzmán, Guatemala City, 24 July 2018.

created and launched a website that serves as a portal to the digital AHPN (referred to here as the D-AHPN). The process of designing the website was conducted with speed and urgency, as the developers and archivists raced to launch the site before the inauguration of Pérez Molina.

From what can be gleaned from Google Analytics page view and website click statistics, the D-AHPN has been consulted by people across the globe (although a majority come from the USA and Guatemala).[46] However, just as with the AHPN's internal databases, searching the records available on the D-AHPN is extremely difficult because of the limitations of the repository, the sparsity of the associated metadata, and the size and complexity of the collection itself. This is frustrating for many users, who have come to expect user-friendly web interfaces and navigation tools.[47] To alleviate this frustration, the website seeks to sensitize users to the time and work required to productively advance their research. The site provides resources for becoming familiar with the repository and the search mechanism, and offers helpful strategies for managing information, such as integrating the Zotero reference management software to keep track of documents as one follows their trail across disparate folders in the collection.[48] These resources cannot replace the vital services provided by the UAI staff who mediate the search process at the AHPN, however. The future development of the site will require attention to this human-mediation element.

When the D-AHPN was launched in 2011 with about 11 million digitized records, it was unique among digital repositories in size and complexity. Subsequently, technology has advanced significantly, and the collection has grown as the AHPN has continued to digitize records. The site, however, has not been updated since that initial launch due to changes at UT, including the departure of most staff involved in the project, and shifts in the capacity and priorities of the libraries' digital team. The lesson we take from these challenges is that, while UT partnered with the AHPN in part to provide stability and resources to the digitization project, those concepts are relative, and even well-resourced and secure institutions are faced with staff turnover, shifting institutional missions and changes in the distribution of resources.

UT continues to invest resources in sustaining the D-AHPN and is in the process of thinking through the possibilities for an updated website. At the same time, the partnership's greatest successes have been the amplification of solidarity shown by the research community at UT. Indeed, we suspect that as long as a more usable repository remains out of reach, it is visibility rather than access that is the primary motivation behind the D-AHPN in the short term. Given the role of US institutions in training the PN and enabling state violence in Guatemala, and the growth of the Guatemalan diaspora in the US, UT colleagues also conceive of this as their way of contributing to accountability for past abuses.

The role of the D-AHPN as a site of public solidarity can take many forms. At a recent event celebrating the seven years of the UT–AHPN relationship, the AHPN stressed the political importance of having a prestigious US university house a digital

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46   Google Analytics indicates over a million page clicks in six months of 2018.

47   While UT has not conducted formal user studies, student feedback from workshops and courses has emphasized the difficulty of navigating the website.

48   'AHPN Digital Archive User Guide,' https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/21392 (accessed 28 November 2018).

archive of this magnitude. The website has inspired conferences and events that bring together researchers interested in supporting the AHPN's mission and demonstrating collective solidarity. It has also been used in graduate courses at UT to inspire new generations of US-based students to learn about the shared history of violence in the US and Guatemala.[49] Among the most rewarding comments the UT library has received was one from a student who, despite being unable to find records about her grandmother who had been disappeared in Guatemala, found great symbolic value in the institutional commitment by UT to preserve and provide access to records about her country's difficult past.[50] Much like other forms of digital work at the AHPN, we see these interactions as examples of irreversible gains to collective memory.

Regionalization

In 2014, the AHPN initiated a project that would further their vision to 'decentralize, democratize, and bring the archive closer' to Guatemalan regions affected by political violence and state repression.[51] The regionalization initiative consisted of creating partnerships with nonprofit organizations deeply engaged in similar struggles to promote truth and justice and giving them copies of a subcollection of the records (digital images and their metadata) associated with the PN units that operated in that region, as well as documentation from other branches that interacted with the regional unit. This effort both created additional digital backups and responded to the 'digital divide' in Guatemala that has prevented access to the AHPN by many potentially interested users. Driving to the UAI in Guatemala City is costly and internet access is also scarce in many regions; when it is available, searching the online portal is difficult.

Initially launched in partnership with the Association for the Integral Development of the Victims of Violence in the Verapaces, Maya Achí (*Asociación para el Desarrollo Integral de las Víctimas de la Violencia*), the regionalization effort has expanded to include partners in six Guatemalan departments.[52] These partnerships have involved nontrivial investments by both parties. The partner organizations are required to provide a computer that will be used for storage and as a point of access to the AHPN subcollection. From the AHPN side, the UAI staff used their auxiliary databases to export all the documents that formed part of the regional subcollection – three million document images on average.[53] These constitute official digital copies, for which the AHPN guarantees the existence and custody of the original document.

49 Virginia Garrard taught three seminars using the D-AHPN in collaboration with UT Libraries staff Kent Norsworthy, Theresa Polk and Hannah Alpert-Abrams.

50 Video conference, Theresa Polk, 6 July 2018.

51 'El Archivo Histórico de La Policía Nacional Regionaliza Información de La Jefatura Departamental de Quetzaltenango,' http://archivohistoricopn.org/pages/inicio/actualidad/el-archivo-historico-de-la-policia-nacional-regionaliza-informacion-de-la-jefatura-departamental-de-quetzaltenango.php?lang=EN (accessed 8 December 2018).

52 AHPN, Regionalization Summary Bulletin, July 2018. The six departments are: Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz, Huehuetenango, Escuintla, Quetzaltenango and Chimaltenango. As of July 2018, two more regionalization projects were planned with partners in Sacatepéquez and Sololá.

53 Video conference, Luisa Fernanda Rivas, head of institutional relations and dissemination, 27 June 2018.

In addition to the digital images, members of the AHPN create a customized packet of supplementary materials for each partner which includes archival descriptive materials and some example searches. Once the 'regionalization packet' is ready, the AHPN staff provide a training session, where several members of the local organization spend three to five intensive days learning about the PN, the organizational and associated archival structure and strategies for effective searching in the subcollection.[54] Partners are also introduced to the online D-AHPN at UT, which can serve as a complementary search resource.

The training also includes managing expectations with respect to the subcollection. UAI staff explain to their new partners that while it will be valuable to have digital records on local computers for certain searches, other searches may require returning to the centralized AHPN to follow the administrative logic. They highlight their limited capacity to monitor and support the partner groups, but emphasize their intention to do so as conditions permit.[55]

Unlike the D-AHPN, which follows a familiar model of digitizing and providing web-based access to an archival collection, the regionalization project is an innovation that lacks obvious predecessors, and it remains experimental. For this study, we made a preliminary attempt to gauge the experience of participating organizations in using and offering access to the PN records to external community members.[56] Overall, local partners have had a mixed experience implementing the goals of the program. As of July 2018, two out of six organizations no longer had an active program.[57] One organization used PN files in a local memory museum. The Association for Memory, Dignity and Hope (AMDE), which we interviewed, has not yet been able to use the collection (described below).[58] Finally, two organizations, including *La Casa de la Cultura, Profesor Julio César de la Roca* (LCC), have made the PN files available for public consultation (Figure 2).

LCC, a municipal and cultural institution and library in Quetzaltenango, has been most successful in offering access to the PN records.[59] After local press outlets advertised the initiative, curious citizens lined up to search in the collection over the next 72 hours.[60] In our interviews, LCC representatives reported receiving an average of two or three people a day since the launch, and have at least one trained staff member available daily to provide user support. This is a major investment and one that reportedly falls outside what other regional partners have been able to make. The LCC's Misael Hernández said he felt encouraged when local university students came to explore the

54 Video conference, Enmy Moran, former AHPN researcher, 18 June 2018; video conference, Herbert Caceres, UAI coordinator, 19 June 2018.

55 Correspondence, Luisa Fernanda Rivas, 9 July 2018.

56 We contacted groups by email, then visited and conducted interviews with representatives from AMDE and LCC.

57 One organization reportedly closed altogether and another changed leadership and abandoned the program.

58 AMDE is an organization comprised of family members of sugar-cane union members who were disappeared in the 1980s. They work to recover the historical memory of their communities to rectify the prevailing narrative about the identity and struggles of their family members.

59 LCC is named after Professor Julio César de la Roca, who directed the organization from the time of its founding in 1960 until 1970, when he was assassinated, presumably for political motives.

60 María José Longo, 'Instan a consultar archivo de la PN,' *Prensa Libre*, Guatemala, 30 August 2017.

Figure 2. 'Computer exclusively for research of the AHPN. Thank you for your understanding!' at LCC in Quetzaltenango, 7 September 2018

region's history through the AHPN records. 'I believe there is interest [among young people] in overcoming conflicting narratives to comprehend what occurred in Guatemala during the war, and to understand the need for reconciliation.'[61]

In contrast, AMDE has had a more difficult time using the digital collection. The AMDE volunteers who attended two training sessions report not having been able to replicate searching once they returned home. While they are privy to how the magnitude and administrative nature of the archive complicates searching, they feel that the difficulty may also be due to their insufficient technological literacy. Without evaluating the accuracy of this self-assessment, we find that this speaks to a broader tendency to overestimate technological capacity while underestimating the human labor, resources and knowledge required to carry out meaningful access. While computers, databases and hardware can create the conditions for access, meaningful

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61 Personal interview conducted by José Rodolfo Kepfer with Misael Hernández, director of LCC, Xela, Quetzaltenango, 8 July 2018. Unfortunately, as of late July, Hernández reportedly no longer worked at the institution.

engagement with the records will depend on deep and sustained human and institutional infrastructure to bring them to life.

Technology creates the possibility of access for communities that might otherwise not feel it is within their reach. At the same time, local resistance cannot be overcome by technology alone. Hernández, while encouraged by the initial public interest in consulting the records, noted that citizens have since been more apprehensive about doing so. He recounts conversations with people from older generations that experienced the conflict, among whom he sensed a fear of searching for and possibly finding difficult answers about the not too distant past. In the case of AMDE, a civil society organization of victims in a region where dominant state narratives and silence about past violence prevail, members expressed that doing the work of preserving memories of violence is often met with resistance in their community. They also see others in the community struggling to bring up the past, such as teachers in local schools who avoid the topic of the internal armed conflict and state repression.[62] One AMDE representative wondered whether, at present, citizens would even be willing to come to their office to consult former police records, and hesitated at the idea of promoting the availability of the resource too publicly. AMDE's ongoing struggle to promote historical memory suggests that the challenges in providing broad public access to these state records of repression go far beyond institutional, technical and even knowledge barriers. They reveal the tenuous social and political context of promoting truth-seeking in Guatemalan regions today.

Transitional justice scholarship is increasingly considering the challenges to postwar reconstruction beyond official state-level initiatives and from more 'local' perspectives.[63] The challenges faced by the regionalization effort shed light on obstacles to facing the past in some Guatemalan communities. Ultimately, the willingness of regional groups to open up access to former police records and the secrets of repression they may hold will be shaped much less by digital copies and technical capacities, and more by the political and social possibilities to take what can now be a practical step to attempt seeking answers on local hard drives in community organizations.

Despite these challenges to providing meaningful access in the short term, archives are by nature valuable for their latent potential to be activated in the future. Thus, the regionalization initiative represents early steps to expand alliances committed to preserving official digital copies of PN records for truth and memory. Each participating organization provides another node in an access network that can continue to be strengthened and can potentially be activated by committed and capable users.

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62 This despite the notion that 'educational content, contexts, and actors at once offer a foundation, vehicle, and outlet for transitional justice processes.' See, Michelle J. Bellino, Julia Paulson and Elizabeth Anderson Worden, 'Working through Difficult Pasts: Toward Thick Democracy and Transitional Justice in Education,' *Comparative Education* 53(3) (2017): 313.

63 For example, Pablo de Greiff and Roger Duthie, eds., *Transitional Justice and Development: Making Connections* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2009); Simon Robins, 'Towards Victim-Centred Transitional Justice: Understanding the Needs of Families of the Disappeared in Postconflict Nepal,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 5(1) (2011): 75–98.

CONCLUSION

Digitization – the vision, the hardware and software and the labor – has been led by an extremely motivated and hard-working AHPN team driven by the mission to protect, mobilize and provide access to AHPN records for Guatemalan citizens. By using technology to amplify this mission, the team has initiated reduplication efforts throughout Guatemala and abroad, built auxiliary databases to unlock the secrets of the PN, contributed to historic trials, and created the opportunity for survivors to seek information from the piles of paper left behind by a perpetrator of state violence. By examining these accomplishments, we have observed how each one provides a window into the complexity of transitional justice at national, international and local scales, given the diversity of relationships to the not too distant past both within Guatemala and among the Guatemalan diaspora. We have also found that these efforts are most successful when they prioritize human connections and individual expertise.

Despite these significant successes, the future of the AHPN appears precarious. Leadership has been abruptly changed, staff contracts are temporary, the international funding on which the AHPN relies is disappearing and, to date, the state of Guatemala has not assigned funds to the archive's functioning. In this context, we reaffirm the value of the digitization and decentralization initiatives as the foundation for long-term accessibility to these records through authentic and reliable copies of evidence of state repression. In the case that the AHPN is unable to continue its work, these distributed records may become the primary sites for ongoing research. However, there remain 55 million pages that are cleaned and organized but not yet digitized. Guatemalan institutions must ensure these paper records continue to exist and remain accessible in the long term.

At the same time, as Toyama urges us to appreciate, technology is not enough. Computers, scanners, databases and websites act as 'levers' that enhance the scale and speed of what people can do.[64] The accomplishments of the AHPN depend first and foremost on the community's capacities – in this case time, commitment, training, expertise, funding and the ability to form alliances – to accomplish its goals. As seen in the D-AHPN and regionalization cases, these have proven to be the most difficult aspects of the work. Other organizations seeking to replicate these accomplishments can learn from the significant investment that the AHPN made in their research staff from the beginning.

When the AHPN staff consistently describe the digital distribution of the records as an 'irreversible' practice of archival preservation, they are not simply speaking about the survival of historical documents. They are also speaking about the irreversible impact that archival engagement has had on individual lives. Each time digital resources enable a legal sentence to be passed, a partnership to be formed or a student to engage closely with a historical record, one more stone is laid along the path towards justice and in the pursuit of illumination, truth and healing.[65]

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64   Toyama, supra n 5.
65   Verne Harris, 'Antonyms of Our Remembering,' *Arch Sci* 14(3/4) (2014): 215–229.