1. Narrative description

Explanation of the library’s innovation

In the digital age, human rights documentation, which is often created on a multitude of devices with little to no metadata by a variety of actors, serves as a valuable resource for scholarship, teaching and advocacy, but presents significant collection, preservation, and access challenges to libraries and archives, activists and advocacy organizations, scholars, and litigators. If this documentation is lost and cannot be used for legal accountability efforts, research, and educational purposes, we will face enormous gaps in the historical record, which in turn will limit our understanding of society, politics, and the world around us. In order to confront this threat to the historical record and to support the myriad of interdisciplinary
human rights scholarship at The University of Texas at Austin, the University of Texas Libraries adopted a post-custodial archive model. This approach to archiving addresses the collection, preservation, and access challenges for human rights documentation; secures valuable scholarly resources for The University of Texas at Austin and the global community; fosters deep collaborative relationships with campus faculty and academic units; and closely aligns with the strategic priorities of the Libraries and the University. While the University of Texas Libraries has primarily deployed the post-custodial archive model in its work with the Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI, http://lib.utexas.edu/hrdi/), we have also used this model for other digital collection development efforts outside the domain of human rights.

The post-custodial theory of archives envisions that “archivists will no longer physically acquire and maintain records, but...will provide management oversight for records that will remain in the custody of the record creators” (Society of American Archivists Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology). The post-custodial archival model departs from the traditional theory and practice of acquisition based on physical custody of records and recognizes that information is not always contingent on its original physical form. To implement this idea, the Libraries partner with organizations who are creating and/or collecting born digital human rights documentation, but lack the resources or technical expertise to ensure the preservation of and access to their materials; within the partnership, organizations maintain physical and intellectual custody over their materials while submitting digital copies to the Libraries for long-term preservation and access. The post-custodial model, as practiced by the Libraries, is rooted in the establishment of deep collaborative relationships--horizontal and reciprocal in nature--with our colleagues and sister institutions around the globe.

In the University of Texas Libraries’ post-custodial model, both archivists and partner organizations are experts. Archivists share their professional expertise in preservation, description, and access in order to help develop the partner organization’s preservation capacity and infrastructure; partner organizations draw upon local labor for digitization work and harness their subject expertise to provide in-depth description of their materials. The resulting product serves the partner organizations’ programming, meets established standards for preservation, and serves as a valuable primary resource for teaching and research. Incorporating the partner organization into the archival process empowers and further invests the local community in the preservation of its cultural patrimony and helps ensure that the historical record remains intact.

Using this post-custodial archival model, the University of Texas Libraries has been able to successfully launch internationally recognized digital collections such as the Genocide Archive of Rwanda (http://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw) and the Guatemalan National Police Historical Archive (AHPN, http://ahpn.lib.utexas.edu). The AHPN partnership exemplifies the
truly innovative potential of the post-custodial archival model in that it fostered collaboration between faculty of different disciplines and drew upon faculty members’ field research ties to provide the foundation for the partnership between the Libraries and AHPN; this collaborative relationship between faculty, the AHPN, and the Libraries has resulted in an ongoing partnership to make 10 million digitized documents publicly available online for teaching, research, legal, and ongoing advocacy efforts. The AHPN partnership also supports broader research and student exchanges with Guatemala as well as curriculum building in both countries.

The University of Texas Libraries’ development of the post-custodial model through the HRDI projects stands at the forefront of broader efforts to redefine the role and identity of the research library as a central component of teaching, scholarship, and resource to 21st century learners. Additionally, the Libraries’ implementation of the post-custodial archival model, which supports teaching and research at the University while helping build the preservation capacity within the partners’ communities strongly aligns with the University’s academic commitment to “scholarship and education that advances the social good,” and the The University of Texas at Austin’s core value “to serve as a catalyst for positive change in Texas and beyond.”

Published mission statement of the University of Texas Libraries

The University of Texas Libraries, as a research library of the first tier, advances teaching, learning and research excellence by providing expansive collections and innovative services to support critical inquiry and knowledge creation for the benefit of society. The University of Texas Libraries will be the preeminent public university library, facilitating information discovery, creativity, and innovation to advance research and the pursuit of critical thinking to transform lives and change the world.

Development and implementation of the program

When the University of Texas Libraries first conceived of its Human Rights Documentation Initiative, we envisioned a more traditional acquisition model in which partner organizations would send their materials for digitization at the Libraries, the Libraries would retain digital copies, and the original material would be sent back to their creators. However, as we began establishing our first partnership, we encountered flaws in the traditional model of acquisition, which requires records creators to send their materials to a distant repository for preservation. Partner and potential partner organizations were reluctant to relinquish custody of their materials, even temporarily. In the first place, the documentation serves their immediate programming needs, be it advocacy or education, and their removal could severely disrupt the organization’s operations. From a preservation standpoint, shipping the materials back and forth between organizations poses an additional risk to the documentation’s already vulnerable
state. Additionally, considering the U.S.’ relations with the countries with whom the Libraries partners, and histories of intervention, as in the cases of Guatemala and El Salvador, or non-intervention as in the case of Rwanda, it is not difficult to understand human rights organizations’ reluctance to hand their materials over to a large U.S. institution.

Thus, the Libraries had to find another model that would facilitate use of rich, unique information resources as well as address both preservation and custody concerns. Drawing upon the post-custodial theory of archives, the Libraries adopted a model that allows record creators to maintain custody of their materials with archivists working with them to develop preservation and access solutions that fit the needs of both groups.

In practice, the post-custodial model means that digitization and descriptive practices occur on-site with the partner organization. To facilitate this work, the Libraries aim to help build in-house preservation capacity by providing consultation on how to complete digitization in accordance with archival best practices and may even provide partner organizations with the necessary digitization equipment. Using collection enrichment funds, the Libraries essentially purchase the resulting digital files and the funds are invested into the domestic economy, typically by compensating the local staff that does the digitization work.

A guiding principle of the HRDI’s post-custodial model is that record creators are experts on their own records. The traditional archival model disempowers record creating communities by removing the materials from their oversight and expertise. In a post-custodial model, partners are responsible for the organization and description of their own material. The Libraries work with partner organizations to develop metadata guidelines that address their needs and support the Libraries’ preservation practices. On a practical level, the Libraries has found that it is necessary for organizations to describe their own material as the task often requires language skills and subject expertise not easily found in Austin. More importantly, however, local description and organization practices help build in-country preservation capacity and promote the organization’s ownership of its cultural patrimony.

This post-custodial approach also helps address issues of scale involved with processing large digital collections. In addition, the value added information provided by partner organizations enables the content to be more readily re-used by scholars and has helped the Libraries to develop deeper collaborations with faculty for incorporating this vital content into the curriculum.

Throughout the course of establishing these post-custodial partnerships, we have learned that our partner organizations would not have chosen to work with the University of Texas Libraries had it not been for the post-custodial archival model and the ability to maintain physical custody over their materials.
Intended clientele

The primary intended clientele for all University of Texas Libraries initiatives developed under the post-custodial model are The University of Texas at Austin scholars and students. To this end, many of the partner agreements between the Libraries and collaborating institutions abroad include specific provisions not only for the exchange of technical expertise in archiving and digital librarianship, but also for student exchanges, research placements, and the expansion of institutional ties in the context of in country scholarly networks. In the case of the AHPN project, the partner agreement stipulates research placements for University of Texas at Austin students at the AHPN archive in Guatemala as well as a series of scholarly events and initiatives related to the digital archive to take place at the University.

To cite one example of these initiatives, during the Spring 2013 semester, University of Texas at Austin History Professor Dr. Virginia Garrard-Burnett is teaching a graduate level course titled “Guatemalan History Through the National Police Historical Archive.” All student assignments for the course will involve research using the AHPN digital archive. Dr. Burnett’s course description is as follows: “This course will explore modern Guatemalan history through the lens of the Guatemalan National Police Historical Archive. The main focus of the course will be on Guatemalan history between 1954-1996, between the CIA-sponsored overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz and the end of that nation’s 36-year long armed conflict. Students may, however, use the AHPN digital archive to explore earlier topics, such as the medical experiments that took place in the 1940s or police relations with the public going back as far as the Archive’s beginnings, in the late 19th century. Students will produce a significant research paper based on materials that they locate in the AHPN digital archive.”

Beyond our campus, the HRDI materials constitute a major research resource in the field of Latin American studies and numerous academic disciplines. These materials are also of fundamental value to the human rights advocacy community, for purposes of justice, truth seeking, and memorialization.

Given the philosophy that underpins the post-custodial model, it is important to stress that another key component of our intended clientele are the constituents of our partner organizations themselves. In fact, in numerous cases, digital resources created as part of these efforts serve as vital tools in the quest for social change that lies at the core of these organizations’ mission.

Principal players

Fred Heath is Vice Provost and Director of the University of Texas Libraries. He has served on the Boards of the Center for Research Libraries (CRL) and the Coalition for Networked
Information (CNI) and as a member of the Steering Committee of the Digital Library Federation (DLF). He has recently served as President of the Board of Directors of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and chair of the Texas Council of State University Librarians (TCSUL). He has served on the Editorial Boards of *Library Quarterly* and the *Journal of Library Administration*, as editor of Library Administration and Management (LA&M), and chair of the editorial advisory board to *College and Research Library News*. He makes frequent presentations and publishes in the areas of digital library trends, evolving user needs, and service quality issues. He received an Ed.D in Education Administration from Virginia Tech, M.S.L.S. from Florida State University, M.A. in Russian History from the University of Virginia, and a B.A. in History from Tulane University.

**Charles Hale** is the chair for Western Hemispheric Trade Studies in the Department of Anthropology and director of the Teresa Lozano Long Institute for Latin American Studies and the Benson Latin American Collection of the University of Texas at Austin. An internationally-renowned activist in anthropology, his research focuses on race and ethnicity, identity politics, and consciousness and resistance. He is a recent past president of Latin American Studies Association (LASA), and the author of *Más que un Indio: Racial Ambivalence and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Guatemala and Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894–1987*. He is also editor of *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*. He taught at the University of California, Davis, before joining the faculty at the University of Texas at Austin in 1996. Dr. Hale received his Ph.D. from Stanford University and his B.A. from Harvard.

**Karen Engle** is the Minerva House Drysdale Regents Chair in Law and the founder and co-director of the Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice at the University of Texas at Austin. She teaches and researches in the fields of public international law, international human rights law, and Latin American law. Her recent works include *The Elusive Promise of Indigenous Development: Rights, Culture, Strategy* (Duke University Press, 2010), "On Fragile Architecture: The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Context of Human Rights" (European Journal of International Law, 2011), and "The Force of Shame" (in *Rethinking Rape Law*, with Annelies Lottmann) (Routledge, 2010). She was Professor of Law at the University of Utah prior to joining the University of Texas. Professor Engle received a Bellagio Residency Fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation in 2009 and an assignment as a Fulbright Senior Specialist in Bogotá in 2010. Professor Engle received her J.D. magna cum laude from Harvard Law School and her undergraduate degree from Baylor University.

**Gustavo Meoño** is the coordinator of the Historical Archive of the National Police of Guatemala, or *Archivo Historico de Policía Nacional* (AHPN). As the lead investigator of the Archive for the national ombudsman’s office, Meoño has been actively involved in both the
preservation of the Archive’s documents and in collecting evidence from these documents to provide accounts of human rights abuses committed during the country’s 36-year civil war. Meoño has served as president of the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation (Fundación Rigoberta Menchú Tum), an organization based in Guatemala City that has played a crucial role in struggles against impunity for human rights violations related to prolonged armed conflict in the country.

Christian Kelleher is the archivist at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, where he manages the rare books and manuscripts division, and the project manager of the University of Texas Libraries’ Human Rights Documentation Initiative that collects, preserves, and promotes access to documentary evidence and history of human rights conflicts worldwide. Before joining the Benson Collection, he was an archivist and records manager with History Associates Incorporated in Rockville, Maryland, where he worked with a number of organizations in the Washington, DC area, including the Organization of American States, the Carnegie Institution of Washington, the National Geographic Channel, and the National Library of Medicine. Mr. Kelleher is a Certified Archivist from the Academy of Certified Archivists. He holds an MLIS from the University of Texas at Austin Graduate School of Library and Information Science with a specialization in Archival Enterprise.

Kent Norsworthy is the Digital Scholarship Coordinator at the Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies and Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin. He is chair of UT Austin’s AHPN Project Coordinating Committee and he was the primary liaison between the AHPN in Guatemala and the team at the University of Texas Libraries that brought the Digital Archive online. Norsworthy is also Coordinator at UT Austin for the Primeros Libros de las Américas project. Over the past 20 years he has been involved in numerous initiatives to bring Latin American content online. Norsworthy holds an MA in Latin American Studies from UT Austin and has lived and travelled extensively in Central and South America.

T-Kay Sangwand is the Human Rights Archivist for the University of Texas Libraries’ Human Rights Documentation Initiative and the Brazil Studies Subject Specialist for the Benson Latin American Collection. Over the past three years, she has worked with non-governmental organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the U.S. to preserve their human rights documentation. In 2009, Sangwand co-founded the Society of American Archivists’ Human Rights Archives Roundtable. Sangwand is a Certified Archivist from the Academy of Certified Archivists and holds an MLIS as well as an MA degree in Latin American Studies from the University of California Los Angeles with specializations in Archives, Spanish, and Portuguese.

Press coverage
Archivists Watch
Politics of Memory Conference on Guatemalan National Police Archive

Archivistica.net
Universidad en EEUU lanza archivo digital de Policía Nacional de Guatemala

Boing Boing
10MM images from Guatemala's National Police go online: disappearances, STD experiments, more

Center for Research Libraries
The Archivo Historico de la Policía Nacional de Guatemala at the University of Texas

The Daily Texan
Digital archive of Guatemala's police force launched at conference

Deutsche Welle
Derechos Humanos: mucho por hacer

El Comercial
Lanzan en Guatemala archivo digital histórico de represión

Global Issues
Guatemala: Archives on Decades of Police Terror Accessible Online

The Guatemala Times
Guatemala: Archives on Decades of Police Terror Accessible Online

Habla Guate
Digital Window Into Guatemala's Past to Launch at Conference on the Politics of Memory

Instituto Humanitas Unisinos
Os arquivos do terror guatemalteco são digitalizados

Latin America News Dispatch
Guatemalan National Police Archive goes Online

noticias.com.gt
Universidad de Texas publicará 12 millones de folios sobre la represión en Guatemala

Pagina 12
Digitalizan los archivos del terror
2. Nominator’s statement

Over the past four years, the University of Texas Libraries has boldly, and successfully, undertaken collection development in research libraries using the post-custodial archival model and related strategies for born digital acquisition, particularly in pursuit of fragile and ephemeral human rights documentation that is crucial for human rights scholarship and advocacy. As a leading research library with renowned technological expertise and experience situated in an academic hub of human rights research, the University of Texas Libraries is strategically placed to play a leadership role in using post-custodial archiving and human rights as part of the strategic imperative of redefining the research library as a central hub of scholarly resources and campus collaboration in the digital age. The University of Texas Libraries is the first research library to implement the post-custodial archival model on this scale, and has done so through the establishment of the Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI) which is “committed to the long-term preservation of fragile and vulnerable records of human rights struggles worldwide, the promotion and secure usage of human rights archival materials, and the advancement of human rights research and advocacy around the world.” As one its key functions, the HRDI establishes preservation partnerships with small grassroots human rights organizations that create or collect human rights documentation and works with the partners to preserve and provide access to their materials. To date the HRDI has established six such partnerships with the following organizations: Free Burma Rangers (Southeast Asia),
The Libraries’ partnership with the Guatemalan National Police Historical Archive (AHPN) exemplifies the realized potential of the post-custodial model while the Libraries’ partnership in the Primeros Libros project demonstrates how the post-custodial model can be successfully implemented outside of a human rights context.

The AHPN project was the first large-scale undertaking following a September 2011 agreement at The University of Texas at Austin to place LLILAS and the Libraries’ Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection under a single leadership team. This collaborative merging of the two units was conceived as a novel way to confront deepening budget challenges--in the Libraries and across campus--and as a means to more strategically align and integrate library collections with the core mission of the The University of Texas at Austin: teaching, learning, and research. The post-custodial archival model, rooted in collaborative networking and horizontal and reciprocal relationships, embodies the ethos that underpins the LLILAS Benson venture as well as the Libraries’ collaboration with the AHPN.

The Guatemalan National Police Historical Archive details some of the darkest moments in Guatemalan history, particularly the numerous human rights violations that occurred during the armed internal conflict of the 1970s-1980s, and the documents contained in the AHPN have always been vulnerable to loss. For years, the police, military, and civilian government officials denied the existence of such an archive. It was not until 2005 that investigators fortuitously discovered the Police Archive while looking for the source of explosions in an abandoned portion of a sprawling military base in Guatemala City. The rat- and cockroach-infested buildings contained immense bundles of moldy, rotting, and decaying documents - approximately 8 thousand linear meters of documents, or 80 million folios of records stretching from 1882 when the police was founded to 1997 when the force was disbanded under the Guatemalan Peace Accords. The AHPN represents one of the largest single repositories of documents ever made available to human rights investigators.

Following years of painstaking work to clean, identify, classify, organize, describe and digitize the documents, the AHPN opened a professionally-staffed public reading room in 2009 to provide access to the digitized documents to anyone able to visit the Archive in person. Many document requests come from prosecutors, human rights investigators, families of the disappeared, scholars and journalists; currently, the Guatemalan Attorney General’s office has several staff members assigned full time to work at the Archive researching ongoing cases of criminal human rights violations by police officials, primarily during the most intense period of the armed internal conflict. Numerous such cases are working their way through the courts,
and several convictions have already been achieved, some relying substantially on documentary evidence from the Archive.

In December 2010, a delegation from The University of Texas at Austin met in Guatemala with AHPN officials, human rights groups, and Guatemalan scholars to explore areas of collaboration. In a subsequent Letter of Understanding between the AHPN and the University -- represented by the Bernard and Audre Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice at the UT School of Law, the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies in the UT College of Liberal Arts, and the University of Texas Libraries—the parties agreed to exchange technical expertise, cooperate in research, engage in capacity-building through legal and academic networks, and organize an international academic conference in conjunction with these activities (http://www.utexas.edu/law/conferences/guatemala/). As a cornerstone of this collaboration, the University of Texas Libraries and APHN publicly launched the AHPN digital archive which contains over 10 million pages of documents online for universal access.

Drawing upon the post-custodial archival model framework, the resulting online digital archive’s implementation relied on the Libraries’ technical expertise and resources and AHPN’s extensive subject expertise for arrangement and description. The AHPN created an arrangement and description system that implements international standards and best practices, and the Libraries were able to translate those standards and practices into an online environment to provide seamless access to the digitized records. In accordance with the APHN’s wishes, the Libraries’ technical team recreated the experience of using the AHPN in person within the digital environment. Without moving the physical archives outside of the country, the Libraries has made the collection universally accessible online.

The AHPN generated an unprecedented collaboration between academics and activists, and between digital library and archives experts in Austin, Texas, and the relatives of victims of a genocidal war in the highlands of Guatemala, to build a project that marries peace-building to the digital twenty-first century. It encourages, across generations and geographical locations, the creation and animation of the intellectual capital essential to underpinning efforts for lasting peace – in Guatemala and elsewhere. In the words of AHPN National Coordinator Gustavo Meoño, “This alliance secures the perpetual public availability of the archive, which is so important for Guatemala. The University of Texas at Austin’s prestige and commitment to academic inquiry gives us an opportunity to guarantee the right to information in the most democratic and permanent manner possible.”

As evidenced by the HRDI’s partnerships with organizations around the globe, part of the success of applying the post-custodial archival model relies on an institution’s ability to utilize it not as a prescriptive or static approach, but as one that is scalable, adaptable, and replicable in
the pursuit of sustainability. Each post-custodial partnership is unique in accordance with the distinct capabilities, resources, and needs of the individual partner organization.

The flexibility of the non-custodial model has allowed us to successfully replicate the HRDI experience outside the context of archives and human rights. To cite one example, since 2009 the Libraries has been one of the lead partners in a broad international collaborative digitization and collection building effort, the Primeros Libros de las Américas project (http://primeroslibros.org/). Primeros Libros seeks to locate, digitize, and provide open access to all known works printed in the Americas prior to 1600.

In exchange for contributing to the Primeros Libros project, the terms of the project agreement entitles each partner to receive a copy of the full corpus of digitized books of all project partners for inclusion in their local collections. This has allowed several Mexican partner institutions, for example, which may own only two or three pertinent titles, to provide access to the full set of books digitized by all 15 Primeros Libros partners.

Just like the projects under the HRDI umbrella, the Primeros Libros project enables new types of scholarship and transforms the way researchers interact with these materials. For example, given that the surviving print editions of these rare books are scattered in numerous geographically dispersed locations, and that several institutions hold the only known existing copy of a work, the digitized corpus constitutes a “virtual collection” that none of the partner institutions would ever be able to build on their own. Additionally, while certain types of research are still best conducted with the print originals in hand, the existence of the virtual collection of digital surrogates enables numerous types of investigation that are impossible with the print versions - such as, the ability to digitally compare multiple versions of the same title side by side on screen. In the absence of the post-custodial model, digital collection building and research enabled by the Primeros Libros project would be difficult, if not impossible, to replicate.

While the post-custodial model runs counter to the de facto custodial ethos long adopted by research libraries, it clearly aligns with the expressed missions of LLILAS, the University of Texas Libraries, and The University of Texas at Austin more broadly. The post-custodial archival model of collection development fulfills the Libraries’ mission to “advance teaching, learning and research excellence by providing expansive collections and innovative services to support critical inquiry and knowledge creation for the benefit of society.” The research and teaching enabled by the human rights related scholarly materials gained through the post-custodial model underscores LLILAS’ “commitment to scholarship and education that advances the social good.” And lastly, the Libraries’ implementation of the post-custodial archival model which incorporates partner organizations into the archival process and empowers and invests the community into the preservation of its cultural patrimony speaks directly to The University of
Texas at Austin’s core value “to serve as a catalyst for positive change in Texas and beyond.” The University of Texas Libraries and its use of the post-custodial archival model in the human rights arena and beyond, which successfully and clearly aligns with institutional missions and priorities, serves as a leader in large scale digital preservation efforts, contributes to a social good, and represents true innovation around the role of a research library in the digital age.

3. Publications, presentations, and references


January 14, 2013

Kent Norsworthy  
The University of Texas at Austin  
Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, College of Liberal Arts  
1 University Station D0800  
Austin, TX 78712

Dear Kent:

I am writing on behalf of the Center for Research Libraries in support of the University of Texas at Austin’s submission to the Stanford Prize for Innovation in Research Libraries (SPIRL) for the “Post-Custodial Archival Model at the University of Texas Libraries.”

CRL is an organization of 270 academic and independent research libraries devoted to the preservation of and access to primary source content for research and teaching in the humanities and social sciences. CRL supports collaborative programs among communities of interest that advance our mission and provide long-term, sustainable access to vital research materials. As the coordinator of the Human Rights Archives and Documentation Program, CRL provides a collaborative framework for institutions to identify, preserve, and provide access to human rights-related archives and documentation by collecting and sharing information about the nature and status of at-risk materials, and providing other technical, communications, and financial support for preserving and maintaining those materials.

The model supported by the University of Texas at Austin is a truly impressive and innovative endeavor. The Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI) at Texas has established unique and robust digital preservation partnerships with organizations that create human rights documentation to preserve and make accessible the historical record of genocide and human rights violations. By employing its post-custodial model of preservation, Texas provides the technical and descriptive infrastructure for long-term preservation and access while ensuring that the human rights organization retains complete ownership over its materials. As a prospective model for other subject- or region-based collections of material, CRL is intensely interested in the outcomes of these efforts.

We would be most pleased to see the work of Texas more prominently highlighted with the library community, and think a SPIRL award would be a highly appropriate way to do so.

With best wishes for the success of your ongoing efforts,

James Simon  
Director of International Resources
January 6, 2013

To the Stanford University Libraries Advisory Council:

I am pleased to write this letter in support of the University of Texas Libraries work with the Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI), an entrant for the Stanford Prize for Innovation in Research Libraries.

The University of Texas Libraries’ HRDI project occupies a unique place among research institutions. In addition to being one of the premier US institutions collecting in the area of human rights, its non-custodial model is an innovative approach to the challenges of ensuring access and preservation of human rights documentation in the digital era.

I write as the founding archivist of the WITNESS Media Archive, which is a partner of the HRDI. WITNESS is a human rights organization that uses and promotes the use of video as a strategy for effective human rights documentation and advocacy. We do so through direct training and collaboration with locally-based, grassroots human rights defenders. Our approach has always been based on a partnership model, which differentiates WITNESS from most traditional human rights organizations. Two premises underpin this model: that, while WITNESS brings expertise in video strategy and technology to a campaign, it is the grassroots groups and human rights defenders whose issue expertise, voices and perspectives must drive its goals and message; and that through training and collaboration, partners can gain knowledge and expertise to autonomously use video for meaningful human rights change.

The WITNESS Media Archive is the repository for over 5000 hours of original, primary-source human rights documentation from over 80 countries, representing dozens of ethnic groups, languages, and human rights issues. In its first years, the Archive was more of a purely custodial archive, serving as the repository for the documentation created by our partners. While that remains true, we have increasingly focused on providing training and strategies to support archival initiatives and efforts by the activists themselves.

In 2010 we decided to seek an institutional partner to serve as a long-term preservation repository for our expanding digital archive, and to better provide access to our materials to the scholarly and research community. While we had discussions with a number of institutions with more established human rights collections, we chose to work with UT on the basis of the HRDI’s approach and philosophy, which so aligns with our own. Despite a fair amount of discussion within archival discourse, practical applications of the non-custodial model have been slow to manifest. The non-custodial approach allows for collaboration, recognizes and draws on the expertise provided by the donor-partner, and places primary importance on continuing access to communities of origin.

Why is this so important? First, the WITNESS collection, typical of human rights collections, is characterized by material that is sensitive, sometimes security-restricted, and represents a broad range of cultures and perspectives. It was vital that our deposit institution respect these sensitivities, as well as the importance of leaving ownership in the hands of the media creators.

Second, the risks to audiovisual human rights documentation surviving as part of the historical record are considerable. Without assertive, proactive, and early intervention in
the process, much of this media will be lost due to its inherent fragility (true of magnetic media but even more so of born-digital files), and to the lack of skills, resources, and infrastructure on the part of those who create or collect it. This is reflected in how we are ourselves are focusing more on knowledge-sharing than collecting per se.

And third, the ethical and moral implications of traditional collecting modes have also been much written about and debated. There is a growing consensus that communities should retain ownership and access to their own history and materials, that decisions about access, ownership and description are culturally bound; and therefore that greater agency in the archival enterprise is a good to be pursued.

We deposited or first material in 2011 and have been extremely happy with the collaboration. Our partners, those grassroots activists whose video collections are represented, have been extremely supportive, knowing that documentation they collected has new life and value, while ensured that any sensitivities or security concerns are respected. As archivists, WITNESS and HRDI have shared resources and worked to problem-solve where needed. Researchers are now able to access these valuable primary source materials without having to physically visit the WITNESS Media Archive. Previously, we would receive footage requests from researchers and did not have the staff or physical space to accommodate such requests. (For more please see our page on the HRDI site: http://rmedia.lib.utexas.edu/index.php?title=Category:WITNESS; and also our own website: http://www.witness.org/media-archive.

The HRDI’s work with its various partners, such as the Genocide Archive of Rwanda, has been truly inspiring, a model not only for research institutions, but for human rights organizations as well. The boundaries between the educational/scholarly community and the NGO world have been difficult to bridge, and to my mind are no longer supportable. Primary source human rights documentation has multiple, important uses: as historical research, as community memory, as evidence supporting efforts towards justice and redress. The HRDI’s amazing work, predicated on reciprocity and collaboration, is a significant force in traversing those boundaries, with the result that the historical record is enriched, access to affected communities is enabled, and engagement in the archival enterprise is expanded to the very people for whom the stakes are highest.

I cannot speak highly enough of this project. Having worked in the field of human rights archives for ten years, it has been tremendously exciting for me to watch the HRDI flourish and forge new ground. The UT Libraries’ innovative approach will ensure research access to a breadth of important material that would otherwise be unavailable.

I have no doubt whatsoever that it will stand as a model for initiatives to come, not only for the study of human rights, but for many other areas of acquisition and study as well.

With best wishes,

[Signature]

Grace Lile
Director of Operations and Archives
WITNESS