

Preserving the First Draft: A Journalists' Archive Initiative for Documenting Extremism and Democracy

Executive Summary

This proposal outlines a scalable initiative to preserve, digitize, and make accessible the primary source materials held by journalists who have documented domestic violent extremism and threats to democratic institutions over the past several decades. These "first drafts of history"—in formats including audio recordings, video footage, reporters' notebooks, photographs, and digital files—represent an irreplaceable historical record that is currently at risk of degradation, loss, or destruction.

The Critical Need

Journalists possess vast archives of primary source materials that never make it into published stories—interview recordings, field notes, photographs, documents, and observations that provide crucial context for understanding the rise and evolution of extremist movements in America. These materials are:

- **At immediate physical risk** from degrading media formats (magnetic tape for older items; obsolete digital formats for newer ones)
- **Scattered and inaccessible** across individual reporters' personal collections
- **Underutilized** for historical research, education, and accountability efforts
- **Essential evidence** for understanding patterns, networks, and the evolution of extremist ideologies, with an eye to better preparing civil society to defend democracy.

Archiving this trove benefits journalism, academia and civil society. The fragility of these historical records presents an opportunity to take action on the urgent need for systematic preservation.

Project Objectives

1. **Preserve** journalists' archives through professional digitization and storage
2. **Organize** materials using standardized metadata and cataloging systems
3. **Protect** sensitive materials while ensuring appropriate access for researchers
4. **Create** educational resources, documentaries, and publications from archived materials
5. **Build** a sustainable model for ongoing collection and preservation

Options for Building the Archive

While this concept is still in development, we have modeled some examples of possible staffing, cost, and deliverables.

Option 1: \$50,000 - Pilot Program

Scope: Proof-of-concept with 3-5 journalists

Activities:

- Digitize and catalog one comprehensive archive as a model
- Develop basic metadata standards and workflows
- Create a simple digital repository using existing platforms
- Produce one demonstration project (e.g., educational website or short documentary)
- Document best practices for scaling

Deliverables:

- 5,000-10,000 items digitized and cataloged
- Technical workflow documentation
- One public-facing educational product
- Report on feasibility and requirements for expansion

Impact: Establishes methodology, demonstrates value, and creates foundation for funding larger initiative

Option 2: \$500,000 - Regional Archive Network

Scope: 15-20 journalists across 3-5 geographic regions with significant extremism coverage

Activities:

- Professional digitization services for multiple formats
- Development of custom database and access system
- Part-time archivists (2) for processing and cataloging
- Creation of educational materials for high schools and colleges
- Production of 2-3 documentary projects
- Legal consultation for privacy and access protocols

Deliverables:

- 50,000-75,000 items preserved and cataloged
- Searchable online database for qualified researchers
- Educational curriculum packages
- Public programming including exhibitions and documentaries
- Quarterly research bulletins highlighting archive discoveries

Staffing:

- Project Director (0.5 FTE)
- Digital Archivists (2 at 0.5 FTE)
- Technical consultant
- Initial survey of work will dictate the hires of senior leadership, archivists, educators, technologists, and researchers

Impact: Creates sustainable regional model, produces immediate educational value, establishes protocols for sensitive materials. Preserves crucial historical record for future generations.

Conclusion

The reporters who have spent decades documenting extremism possess an irreplaceable historical record. Their archives contain the evidence, context, and human stories that can help us understand how we arrived at this moment—and how we might find our way to a better future. By preserving these materials now, we ensure that future generations will have access to the primary sources needed to study, understand, and prevent violent extremism.

This initiative represents more than preservation. It is an investment in truth, accountability, and the tools needed to protect democracy. In our era, legitimate reporting and research on extremism is being denigrated, denied and destroyed. These archives will provide the historical clarity and evidence base necessary for informed action and lasting change.