

Assange Archive

Why physical archives matter in an age of disappearing truth

“Who controls the past controls the future.” – George Orwell

by “Julian Assange Archive e.V.”

(CH-S) In 2024, the fearless Australian investigative journalist Julian Assange was released from Belmarsh Prison in London.¹ He had exposed US war crimes. Since 2010, the year of his unlawful arrest, people around the world had worked tirelessly to ensure that he was not forgotten. They stood outside embassies and courts, organised protests, wrote letters, held vigils and continued to speak out about his “case” even after it had all but disappeared from the public eye.

The “Assange Archive” documents these efforts and highlights the importance of physical memory. Anything that exists only in digital form can be falsified or deleted – objects in an archive are “living” history.

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In his 2010 speech at the Oslo Freedom Forum, Julian Assange touched on something that feels even more relevant today than it did at the time. Speaking about archives, memory, and historical preservation, he referenced Orwell’s famous line: “Who controls the past controls the future.”

Struggle over reality

Julian’s point was not nostalgic. He was not speaking about archives as static museums of history, but as something profoundly alive and political. What he was describing was the struggle over reality itself – over what survives, what disappears, and who ultimately gets to define historical truth.

And perhaps this is one of the most misunderstood aspects of our digital age.

We often speak as though information today is permanent simply because it is digital. We live surrounded by endless streams of content, constant documentation, uploads, recordings, screenshots, and archives of archives. There is a widespread assumption that because something once existed online, it will somehow remain accessible forever.

But the opposite is often true.

Illusion of permanence

Digital culture creates the illusion of permanence while producing a constant condition of disappearance. Accounts vanish. Videos disappear. Links break. Platforms collapse. Search visibility changes. Context dissolves beneath the endless acceleration of new information. Material is buried not only through censorship, but through overload, fragmentation, and the speed at which everything becomes replaceable.

And this changes the nature of historical memory itself.

How does memory survive?

From a scientific perspective, collective memory does not survive simply because information once existed. Memory survives through continuity, reinforcement, and material accessibility over time. Societies remember through structures that stabilise knowledge against disappearance. When records become unstable, fragmented, or dependent on systems controlled by shifting political or corporate interests, public understanding itself begins to weaken.

This is precisely where Orwell’s warning becomes deeply modern.



“Who controls the past controls the future.”
(Picture ma)

The quote is often repeated casually now, almost aesthetically, but Orwell was describing something extremely concrete: whoever controls the surviving record of reality also gains influence over how future generations understand truth itself.

And this process is rarely obvious.

It does not only happen through dramatic censorship or the destruction of books. More often, it happens gradually. Through omission. Through dependency. Through algorithmic invisibility. Through the quiet disappearance of context. Through systems that decide what remains visible and what slowly fades away.

The importance of Archives

Archives therefore are never neutral.

They are infrastructures of memory.

They determine not only what can be studied in the future, but what can still be proven.

Throughout history, institutions and states have always understood this. Archives have been centralised, censored, selectively opened, rewritten, neglected, or destroyed precisely because controlling records means influencing historical reality itself. The struggle over memory is ultimately a struggle over legitimacy, continuity, and power.

The digital age intensified this dramatically.

Today, enormous parts of collective memory exist on privately controlled infrastructures. Political movements increasingly leave behind traces scattered across platforms whose priorities can change overnight. Search engines shape visibility. Algorithms shape perception. Information can remain technically accessible while becoming culturally invisible.

And invisibility is often enough.

Physical archives matter more than ever

This is one of the reasons why physical archives matter more than ever.

A physical letter cannot be algorithmically buried. A protest banner cannot disappear because a platform changes ownership. A handwritten note does not vanish because a moderation system changes policy. Physical artefacts resist disappearance precisely because they continue to exist outside systems designed around speed, control, monetisation, and constant replacement.

And perhaps nowhere is this more important than in grassroots movements.

Become a Guardian

To become a Guardian of the “Julian Assange Archive e.V.” means helping to ensure that this history remains physically preserved, independent, and accessible for future generations.

Not hidden behind platforms.

Not vulnerable to deletion.

Not reduced to fragments.

If you would like to take part in sustaining this work, you can do so here:

<https://www.julianassangearchive.org>

Every act of participation helps keep independent memory alive.

Movements are often remembered through simplified headlines, public figures, or institutional summaries, while the human reality behind them slowly dissolves. What disappears first are usually the traces of ordinary participation: handmade signs, flyers, letters, photographs, improvised artworks, personal notes, and fragments created by people who were never powerful, but who decided to act anyway.

Yet these materials are often the most historically important part.

Because they show that history was not inevitable.

They show continuity, persistence, pressure, emotion, courage, exhaustion, and solidarity.

They show that political reality is not shaped only from above, but also from below.

Political reality shaped from the bottom up

This is particularly true in the case of Julian Assange.

For more than a decade, the movement surrounding his case existed not only through legal arguments or media narratives, but through thousands of acts of participation across the world. Vigils outside Belmarsh and everywhere in the world. Demonstrations. Posters. Banners. Letters sent to the embassy and prison. Artworks. Independent journalism. Conversations. Human presence sustained over years.

Most of these actions appeared small at the time.

But together, they created continuity. They created pressure. They prevented disappearance.

Without preserving these traces physically, movements risk becoming reduced to simplified narratives detached from the people who carried them. Future generations may know the

outcome but lose the reality of how it happened.

This is why the Julian Assange Archive exists physically too.

Not as nostalgia. Not as mythology. But as resistance against erasure.

Because memory matters. Because truth requires evidence.

And because the struggle over the future is always also a struggle over what remains visible from the past.

Warm regards, Manja
For the Julian Assange Archive e.V.

Source: https://assangearchives.substack.com/p/who-controls-the-past-controls-the?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=2920341&post_id=198223896&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=1dbpyt&triedRedirect=true&utm_medium=email, 18 Mai 2026

¹ In his book "The Trial of Julian Assange – A Story of Persecution", the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, the legal scholar *Nils Melzer*, documented the story of Julian Assange, who has been charged with espionage.