



On October 31, 2011 John Ciorciari, Assistant Professor of Public Policy at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, presented his paper entitled "Archiving Memory after Mass Atrocities". The paper examined how best to record and preserve the documentation of mass atrocities through the use of archives.

Ciorciari, who also serves as a Senior Legal Advisor for Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), an NGO that has collected over a million documents from the Khmer Rouge era, argued for a foundational approach to archiving. A foundational approach is one that favors using the government to create and maintain national archives rather than NGOs or private individuals. Ciorciari contended that national governments, in contrast to NGOs or private individuals, tend to have the resources as well as the necessary legitimacy to build a credible, historical record of events.

"All documentation is a political act," said Ciorciari. "A foundational approach tries to set up a collection in a way that makes it less political and more inclusive. The idea is that you get a more holistic approach through which the truth can emerge."

Ciorciari did note that there are some normative tradeoffs to this foundational approach. "How do you determine how to apply scarce resources? Whether to publicize the documents? And what are the ethical disclosure practices that must be in place?" he asked. In particular, Ciorciari mentioned two potentially competing interests: an individual's right to privacy and a government's need to protect its national security.

While Ciorciari advocated for national archives, he nevertheless acknowledged that sometimes governments are unable or even unwilling to create and preserve national archives. "Who then should be responsible?" he asked. Ciorciari pointed to examples of NGOs who took the initiative, sometimes with the host government's permission and sometimes without, to create their own archives. He also discussed the United States and its decision to remove documents found in Iraq to Texas. "Must the US give these documents back? And, if so, when?"

Ciorciari was quick to point out that in the wake of mass atrocities, national archives, while important, are not the entire solution. “Maintaining an archive is not a complete history,” said Ciorciari. “It helps us better understand how a regime operated, but it won’t tell us what innocent women in a northwestern village were experiencing and feeling. We need to add to these archives with oral histories and other personal stories – things we can find in notebooks, family albums and the likes. We must think of an archive as a living organism.”