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Activist Archiving for Environmental Justice

The petrochemical industry today is both accelerating in some directions, and losing standing and profitability in others. It is thus crucial that people with different kinds of expertise and experience help watch over the industry, aware that consequential decisions will be made in coming years – decisions about how problems created by the industry in the past will be addressed; about whether petrochemical production should be expanded, and – if so – where; about laws that regulate the industry and about the ways regulatory enforcement will be handled; about how plants that are aging or no longer profitable will be have special oversight and possibly be decommissioned.

The [Formosa Plastics Global Archive](#) (台灣塑膠檔案館)¹ is designed to support a transnational network of people concerned about the operations of Formosa Plastics Corporation, a vertically-integrated Taiwanese petrochemical company. Formosa Plastics is one of the largest chemical companies in the world, with facilities in Taiwan, China, Vietnam, and the United States. Formosa Plastics has a damaging record of explosions, routine pollution, and “mafia-like” behavior with environmental activists and other critics (Democracy Now 2020; Vass 2020). The archive includes [monitoring data](#), [testimonies](#) and [interviews](#) with workers, [company audits](#), [news clippings](#) and [legal documents](#) related to litigation against Formosa Plastics.

The intensive data collection practices among environmental activists and residents affected by Formosa Plastics stems from awareness of ways environmental and data politics are entwined, and often data are accumulated over decades of work. The data are heterogeneous, unstructured and usually informally organized. Often, the person who collected the data needs to be interviewed to learn about its provenance and relevance. There is an overwhelming amount of material to sort through, and many ways of thinking about what should be prioritized for sharing. Some of the material is relevant in lawsuits seeking damages or in efforts to slow Formosa Plastics’ expansions. In these cases, timing the publication of data is sensitive; to manage this, the Formosa Plastics Global Archive has capacity to preserve and work with data in digital spaces restricted to a delimited group until ready for release.

¹ The archive name remains preliminary and may be changed for strategic or legal reasons.

The Formosa Plastics Global Archive was developed in close collaboration with affected communities. In 2019, a lawsuit filed by people living near Formosa Plastics' facility in Point Comfort, Texas resulted in a US \$50 million settlement. The lead plaintiff, former shrimp boat captain Diane Wilson, has been watching and resisting Formosa since the early 1990s. The records Wilson has kept (including leaked company audits, interviews with workers, and years of news clippings) fill a large barn. In recent years, traveling by kayak, Wilson and others have been on nurdle patrol, tracking Formosa's plastic pollution discharge to local waterways. The recent legal settlement included funds to support this work to assess compliance with a court order for "zero discharge." Weekly water monitoring reports produced by Wilson and collaborators include photographs and textual descriptions of plastic pellet pollution at water discharge outlets from the Formosa plant. Wilson also donates plastic pellets to the citizen science initiative [Nurdle Patrol](#) at the University of Texas at Austin.

From our research, we have learned that environmental data sharing has strategic importance in especially complex ways when dealing with multinational corporations. Like Diane Wilson in Texas, activist fisherfolk in Yunlin County, Central Taiwan have collected large amounts of [documents](#), which they have generously made available for sharing. For researchers, it's an opportunity to introduce new layers to analysis of Formosa. Through an [interactive timeline](#) of news articles, legal anthropologist Shan-Ya Su recounts how local Yunlin residents – framed in dominant narrative “backward” and susceptible to industry influence – did in fact express suspicion and resistance against the 6th Naphtha Cracker Plant.

Data related to lawsuits (worker interviews, leaked company audits and expert testimony) can be used by plaintiffs and lawyers seeking litigation against Formosa Plastics in different places. The Formosa Plastics Global Archive also includes a set of [courtroom sketches](#) drawn by sociologist Paul Jobin on a case in Taiwan started by a fence-line community (see also [Jobin 2021a](#)). These sketches powerfully recall both the dynamics of the legal case and are an inspiring example of collaboration between academic researchers and communities impacted by pollution. In working with these data, we learned that court illustrations are a recognized data type and that we can learn from on-going curation of these at places like the [U.S. Library of Congress](#).

The archive can also support advocacy efforts of different kinds. In Southern Louisiana, the [StopFormosa coalition](#), led by the faith-based group RISE St. James, keeps mounting impressive organizing and social media campaigns. Here, the archive can help supplement reports, for example by safely storing grey material that is frequently hard to find and lacking basic

metadata, such as author names or dates. Offering interpretative flexibility and various genres of expressions are also important features of the digital workspace. In her analysis of environmental advocacy in East Asia, Haddad (2021) points out that activists in Taiwan have increasingly moved from protest to working with stakeholder networks.

Enrolling journalists (and other cultural producers) in the archiving effort further helps understand and support news capacity. This is especially important in the United States, which has seen a rapid decline in local news outlets. In Taiwan, we worked with the producers of the public environmental TV show [Our Island 我們的島](#), who have Formosa Plastics since the 1980s, and is a perfect example of Taiwan's civic ecological nationalism (Jobin 2021b). Per our request, the team added English subtitles to episodes addressing air pollution from the Sixth Naphtha Cracker and the 2016 marine disaster, caused by a Formosa Steel factory in Central Vietnam. Project lead and documentary director Chin-Yuan Ke considered the archive as a resource to add transnational angles to their reporting (see [translated episodes](#)). In our conversation, Ke mentioned that getting information about the company has become increasingly difficult, as interlocutors fear retaliation by the company (see also [Jobin 2021a](#)).

The Formosa Plastics Archive is also designed to prompt people in different Formosa locations to see themselves as part of a shared community-of-practice. Building on critically acclaimed projects like the 2013 exhibition *When the South Wind Blows* (Huang & Chen 2018), our research team staged a [public event](#) in Taipei, including framed court sketches, documents and do-it-yourself displays of plastic pellets. Akin to the influence of Taiwan's literary public sphere of the country's democratic development ([Au 2020](#)), and the contribution of its environmental movement (Jobin 2021b), the archive might be able to push discourse on just transition in new directions.

To do so, the Formosa Plastics Global Archive needs to be multilingual, and telling many stories at once. Weaving these stories together is a challenge, narratively and technically. One strategy so far – built out under the title [Sugar Plantations, Chemical Plants, Covid-19](#) – literally walks people to Formosa, through a virtual tour of Louisiana's Cancer Alley, stopping at the Sunshine Bridge on the Mississippi River near the proposed site of the new Formosa Plastics complex.

Our research group has taken the lead designing and developing the Formosa archive, working across sites in Taiwan and the United States, moving between academia, courtrooms, personal data collections (like Diane Wilson's barn) and cultural institutions (like the official Formosa Plastics Museum). As curators, we are intensely attuned to the overlapping contexts in which

the archive they are building will operate, working against both corporate greenwashing and the isolation of geographically distributed communities impacted by Formosa Plastics' operations.

Formosa Plastics continues to expand, extending production capacity at existing sites and with plans for a new multi-billion dollar chemical manufacturing complex in St. James Parish, Louisiana, an area already known as "Cancer Alley." Lawsuits have been filed and activists have been mobilized to challenge approval of the project by Louisiana's Department of Environmental Quality. Arguments against approval refer to Formosa Plastics' long history of misconduct, to the area's already exceptionally high pollution burden, and to the history and present challenges of nearby African American communities. They also note massive local property tax exemptions, approved by the Louisiana Board of Commerce. Formosa Plastics and Louisiana state agencies continue to insist that the new complex will bring jobs and other economic benefits (Mosbrucker 2020).

These decisions by industry and policy makers will have fateful impacts in diverse plant communities, working through diverse national regulatory regimes but all within a planetary frame. There is thus a need to organize at all scales, linking people across geography, and generation, linking university researchers and students to impacted communities, activists, journalists, artists and government representatives who share commitment to inclusive prosperity and planetary health. The Formosa Plastics Global Archive support works of this kind, helping identify questions that need to be asked, data that needs to be collected and analyzed, arguments that need to be made, and strategies that might work in effort to mobilize positive change.

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