Hierarchies of Visibility: Mapping El Salvador's AV Archives in the Digital Landscape
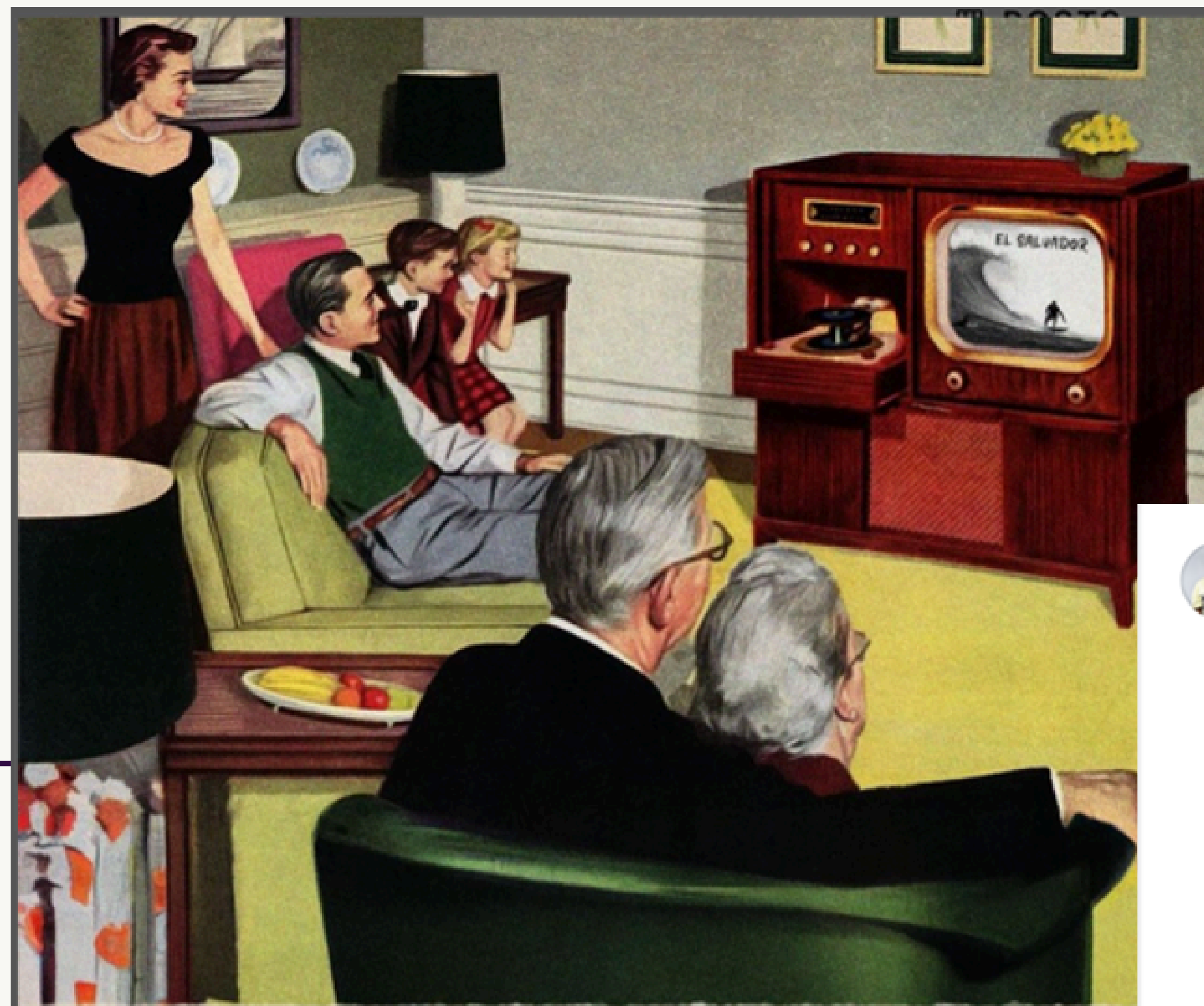
AUTHOR

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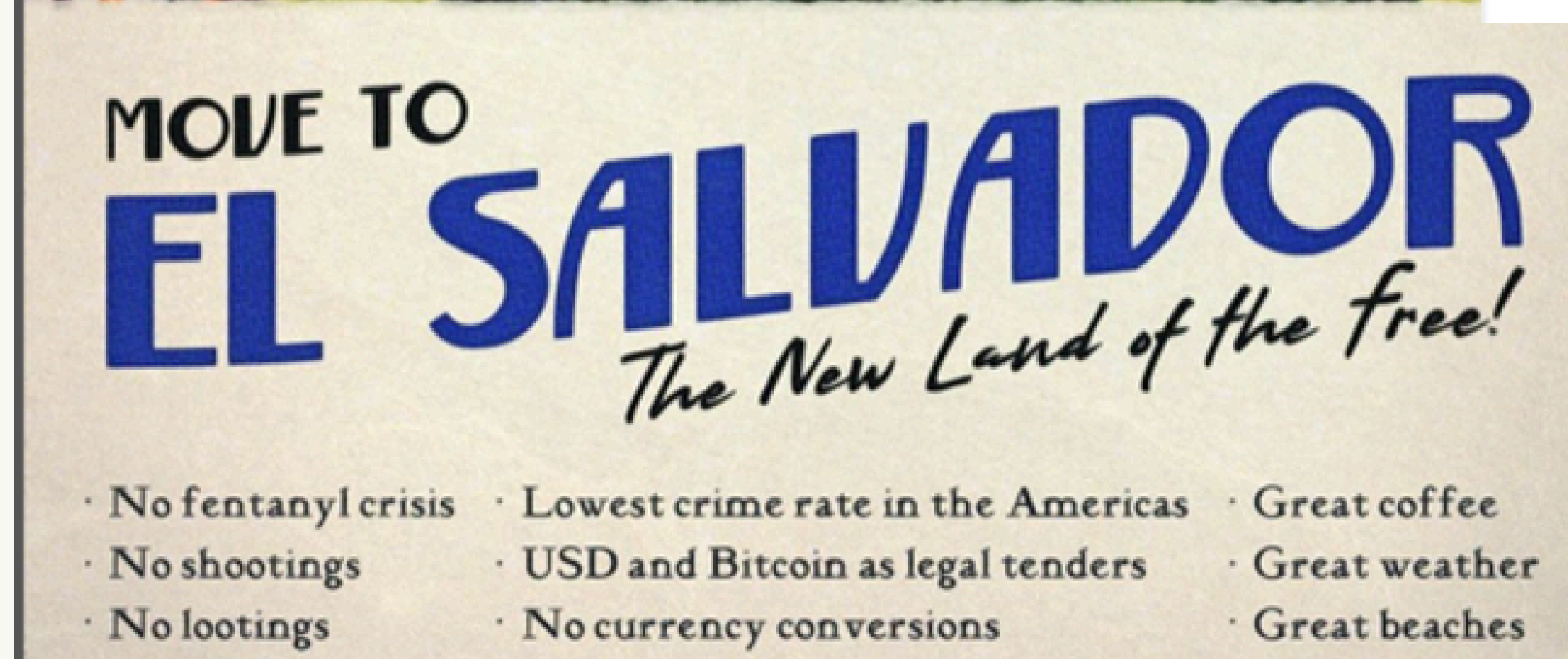INSTAGRAM POST ON PRESIDENT NAYIB BUKELE'S VERIFIED ACCOUNT. FROM HTTPS://WWW.INSTAGRAM.COM/NAYIBBUKELE/?HL=EN

INTRODUCTION

Global digitalization heralded the democratization and decolonization of archival access, promising marginalized groups unprecedented levels of autonomy and power to participate in the creation of their own political and historical narratives. This project sought to examine if these hopes have been realized, or if the power dynamics of the pre-digital archive have simply been reproduced in the digital realm. In order to illuminate the challenges and opportunities new digital realities present for under-resourced audiovisual archives in the Global South, this project took a focused look at the digital visibility and accessibility of audiovisual archives in El Salvador, a nation which has long suffered from deliberate archival repression both at home and abroad, in addition to a history of political, economic, and social instability.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How have organizations with audiovisual archives in El Salvador responded to new digital realities? Has the promise of democratization and access promised by the new digital paradigm borne fruit for previously marginalized voices in this region, or are the power dynamics of the past simply being reproduced on an even greater scale? Has digitalization, in short, been successful in the democratization and decolonization of audiovisual archives in El Salvador?

METHODOLOGY

Identifying institutionalized bias and data absence through systematic search analysis:

- CASUAL SEARCH: Google
- ACADEMIC SEARCH: WorldCat
- DIRECTED SEARCH: Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen (MUPI); Archivo Mesoamericano, Indiana University; Radio Venceremos Collection, University of Texas; Archivo General de la Nación de El Salvador, Biblioteca Nacional Francisco Gavidia, Universidad de El Salvador

RESULTS

Overwhelmingly, visibility was seen to be skewed to organizations in the Global North, and resources within the country itself to be largely invisible to all but the most dedicated searchers. In response to the entrenchment of latent colonial structures by algorithmically driven commercial search interfaces such as Google and WorldCat, smaller archives are increasingly embracing easily accessible but inherently ephemeral platforms such as YouTube and Facebook.
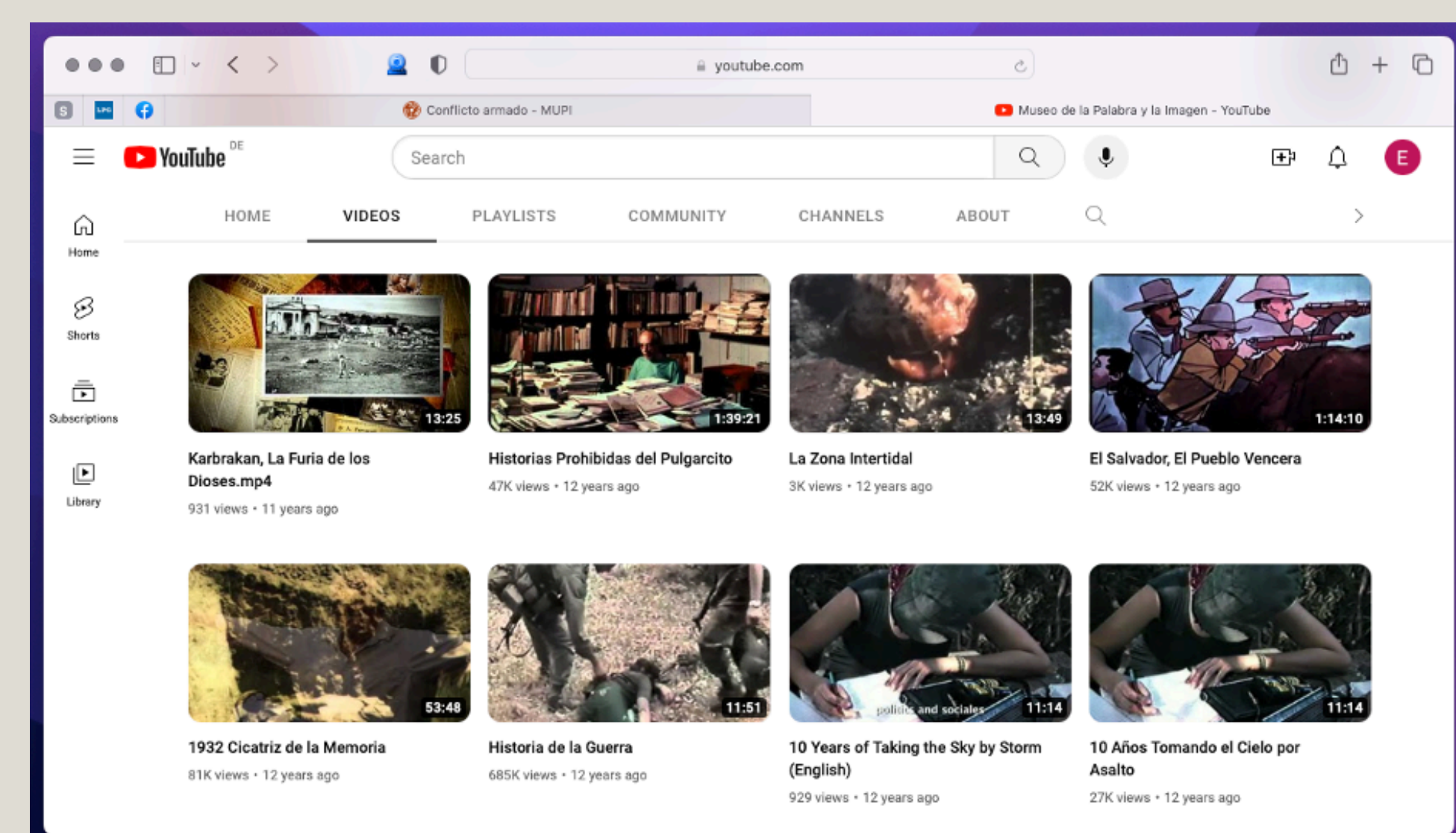
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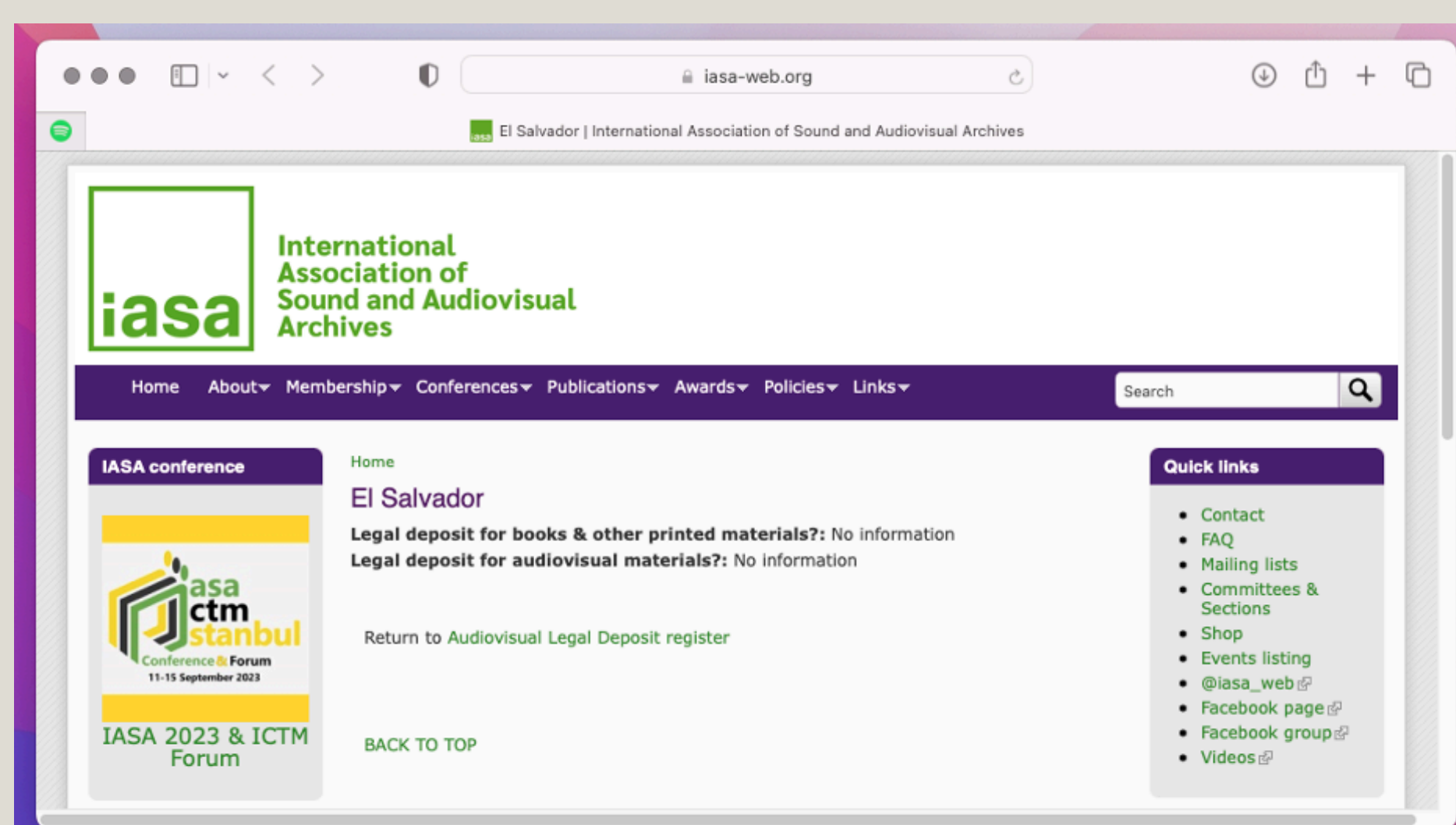
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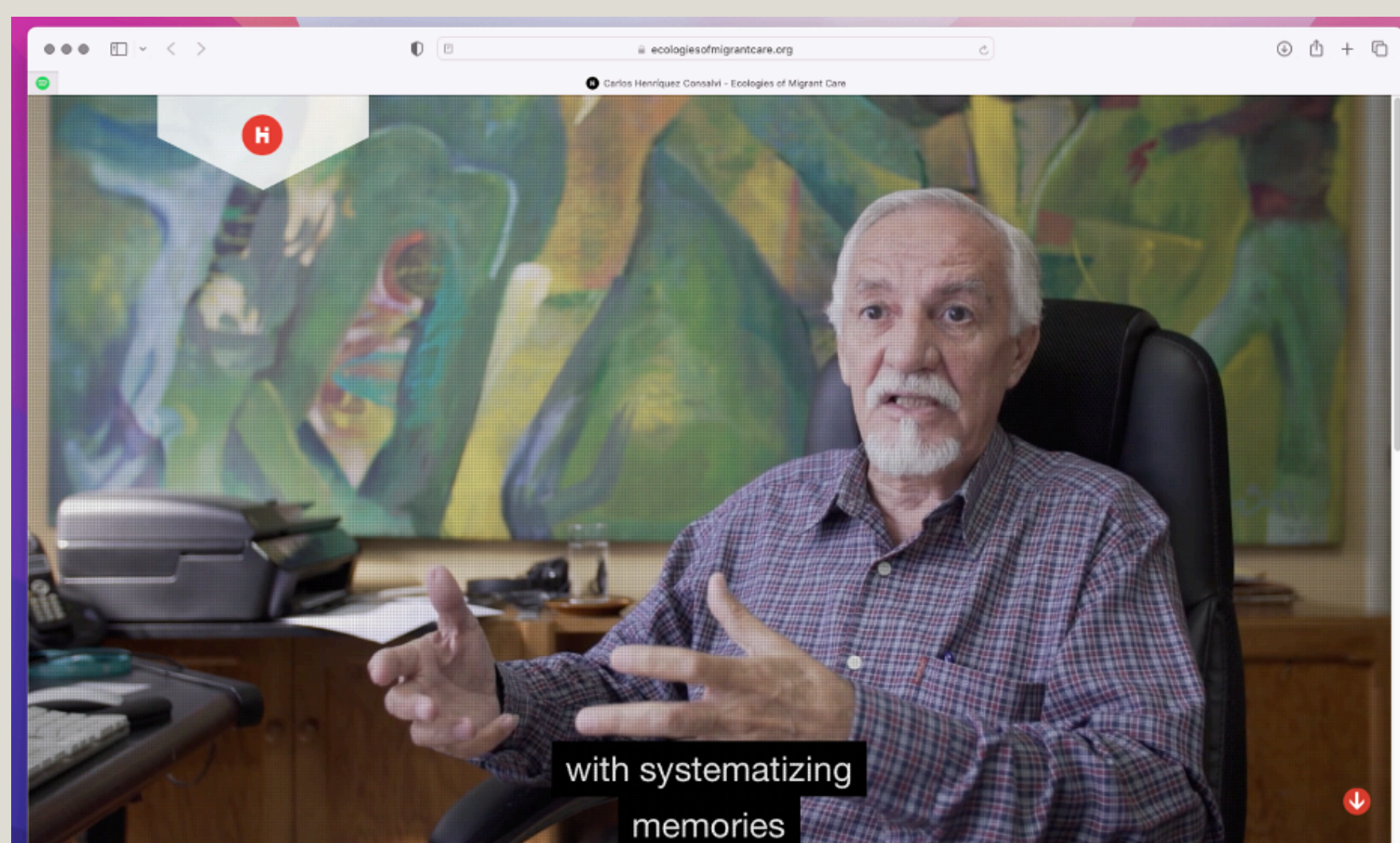

SCREENSHOT FROM ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH CARLOS HENRÍQUEZ CONSALVI, DIRECTOR OF MUPI, CONDUCTED IN SAN SALVADOR, EL SALVADOR ON 23 NOVEMBER 2016 BY THE ECOLOGIES OF MIGRANT CARE PROJECT. HTTPS://ECOLOGIESOFMIGRANTCARE.ORG/CARLOS-HENRIQUEZ-CONSALVI/

SELECTION OF VIDEOS AVAILABLE ON MUPI'S YOUTUBE PAGE. FROM HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/@SALARRUES/VIDEOS
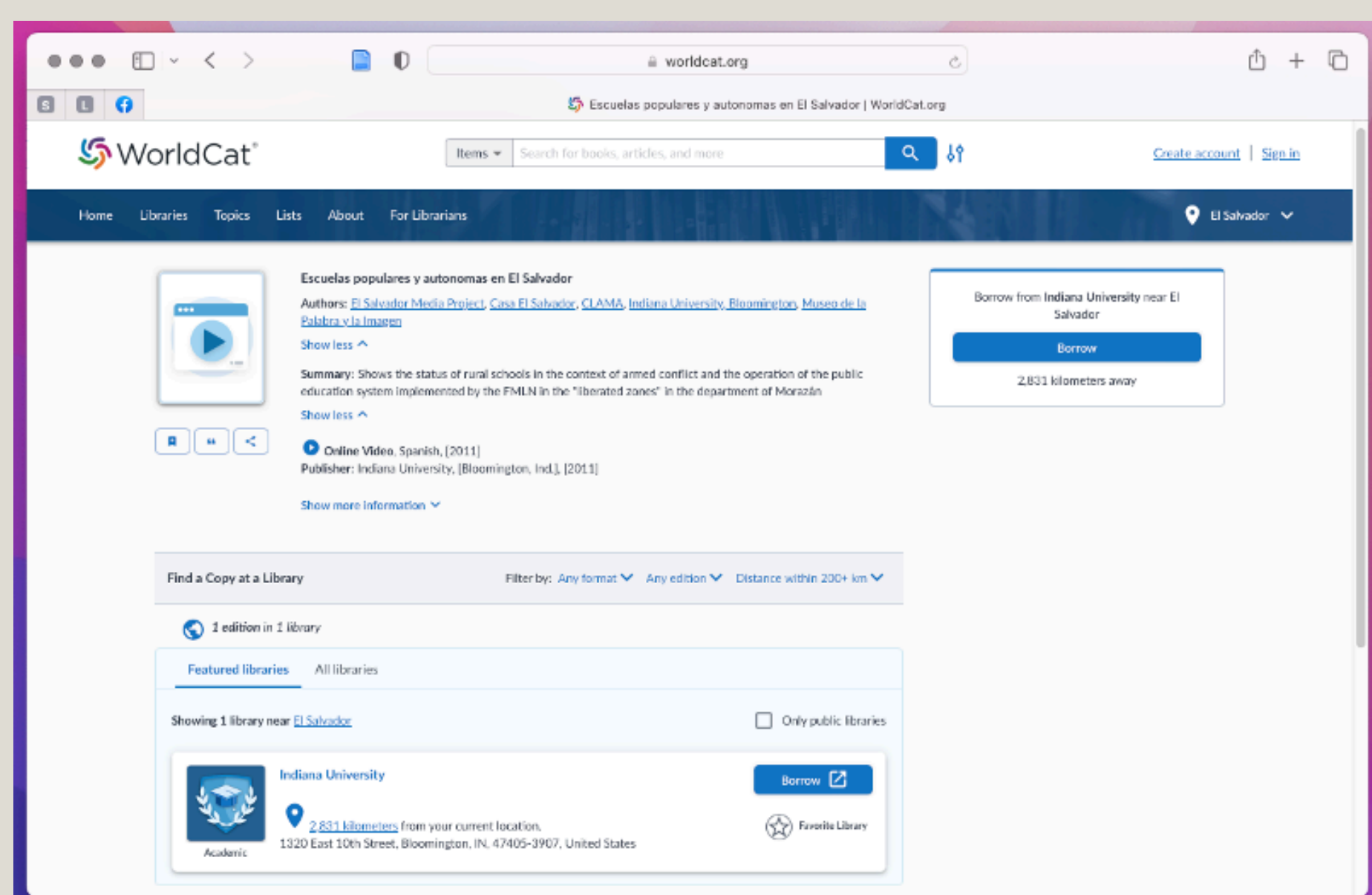
WORLDCAT RECORD FOR "ESCUELAS POPULARES Y AUTONOMAS EN EL SALVADOR," DIGITIZED FROM MUPI'S COLLECTION AND MADE AVAILABLE ON THE ARCHIVO MESOMERICANO PLATFORM THROUGH THE FACILITATION OF INDIANA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY. FROM HTTPS://WWW.WORLDCAT.ORG/TITLE/773280503?OCLCNUM=773280503
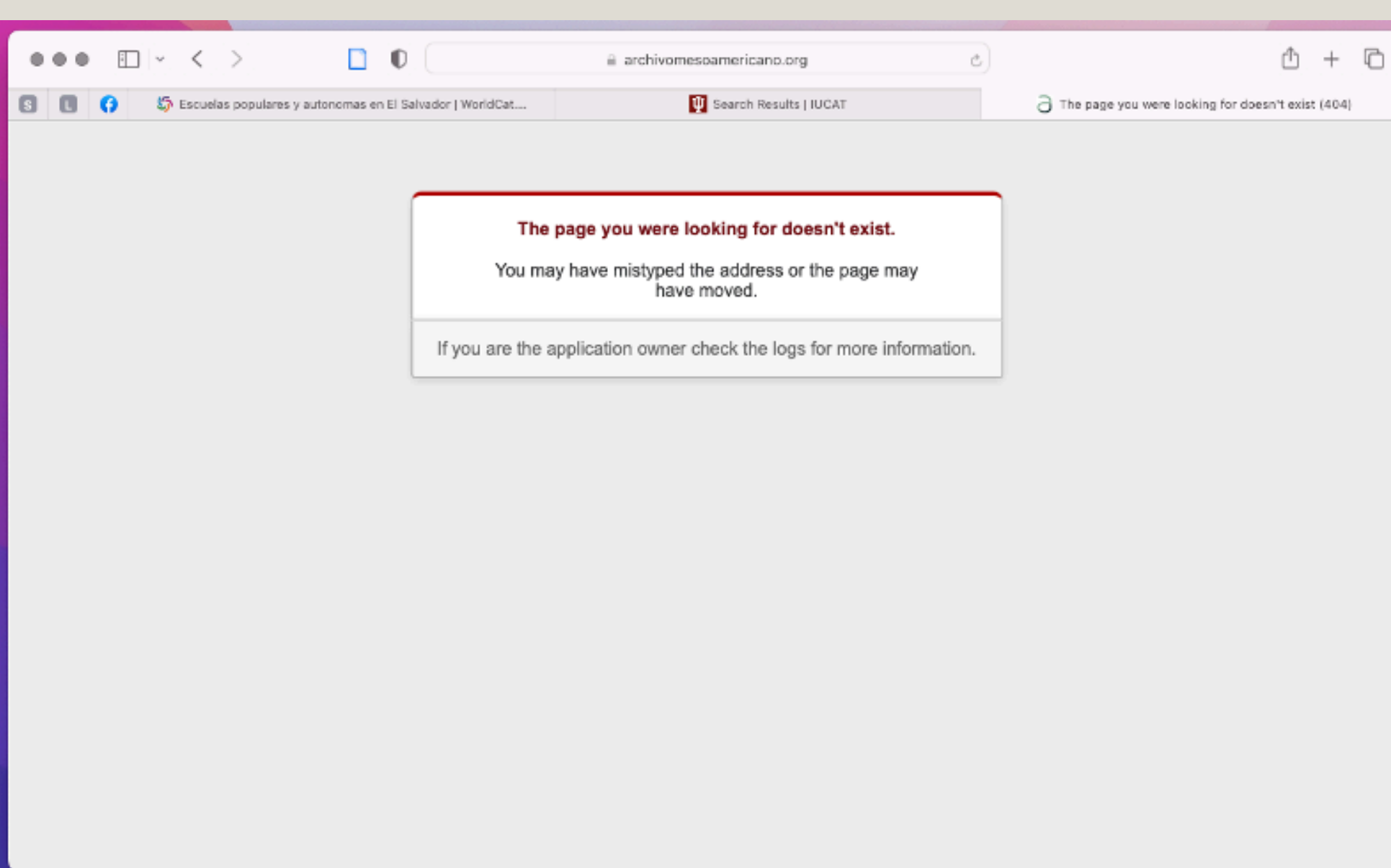
SCREENSHOT FROM INDIANA UNIVERSITY'S IUCAT PLATFORM INDICATING THE HYPERLINK PROVIDED ABOVE FOR "ESCUELAS POPULARES Y AUTONOMAS EN EL SALVADOR" DOES NOT EXIST. FROM HTTPS://ARCHIVOMESOAMERICANO. ORG/CAMVASB/DISPLAYSEGMENT.HTML?ID=I0046-C4987
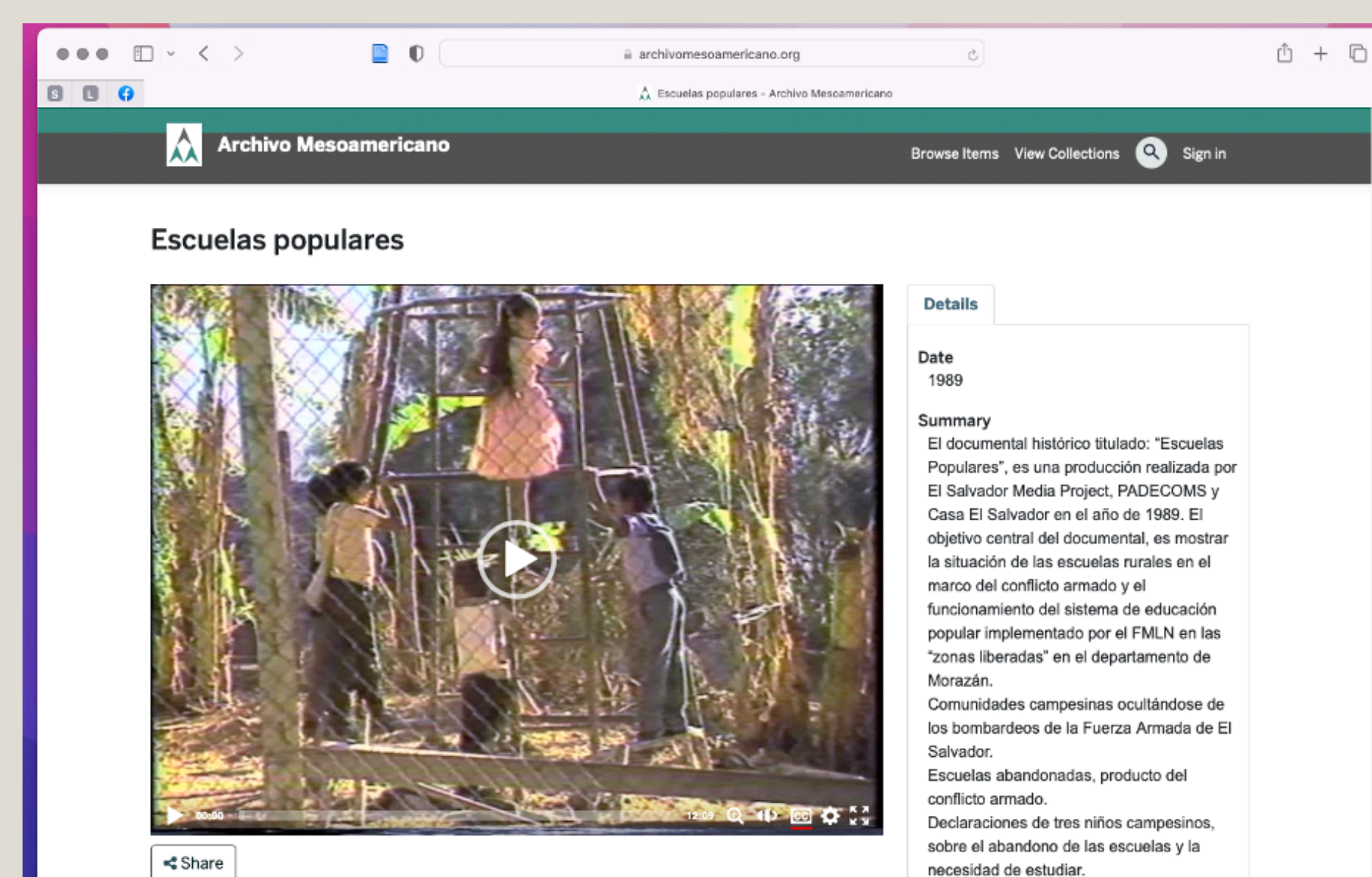
"ESCUELAS POPULARES Y AUTONOMAS EN EL SALVADOR" ON THE NEW ARCHIVO MESOAMERICANO PLATFORM. FROM HTTPS://ARCHIVOMESOAMERICANO.ORG/MEDIA_OBJECTS/76537134T

CONCLUSION

This exploration demonstrates that rather than benefiting from the promise of democratization heralded by the coming of the digital age, previously marginalized archival organizations and communities such as those in El Salvador, are largely being marginalized anew by the entrenchment of past power structures in the processes of global digitalization. However, by taking a step towards understanding how the structures and processes of digitalization function to create hierarchies and entrench colonial power dynamics online, this study seeks to contribute to the identification of ways to achieve greater visibility for the most marginalized voices in the archive.

WHAT'S NEXT

- Expansion of study to include other Central American nations and archives
- Exploration of consequences and opportunities afforded by usage of ephemeral digital technologies by smaller archives
- Working with regional partner archives to develop strategies for remediating digital disenfranchisement through the mobilization of novel data visualization strategies and the application of methodologies and workflows developed for documenting ephemeral data documentation strategies by human rights initiatives such as Mnemonic and the Berkeley Human Rights Center