



THE HUMAN RIGHTS INVESTIGATIONS LAB: REFLECTIONS FROM OUR PILOT YEAR

Alexa Koenig and Andrea Lampros



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

SOCIAL MEDIA REPORT
JULY/SEPTEMBER



Human Rights in the Digital Age: CGHR Practitioner Papers

The Centre of Governance and Human Rights (CGHR), launched in late 2009, draws together experts, practitioners and policymakers from the University of Cambridge and far beyond to think critically and innovatively about pressing governance and human rights issues throughout the world. The Centre aims to be a world-class interdisciplinary hub for fresh thinking, collaborative research and improving practice.

This CGHR Practitioner Paper series, by and for practitioners, provides a space to consolidate, reflect upon, and share knowledge of human rights in the digital age. Contributors also present their work to the CGHR community, and prospective contributors are welcome to contact CGHR with submissions.

Editors: Ella McPherson and Niyousha Bastani

Publisher: Centre of Governance and Human Rights, University of Cambridge

Contact: www.cghr.polis.cam.ac.uk,

cghr@polis.cam.ac.uk

(+44) (0)1223 767 257

About the authors

Alexa Koenig, JD, PhD is executive director of the Human Rights Center, a lecturer in law and legal studies, and co-founder of the Human Rights Investigations Lab at the University of California, Berkeley, which she directed until February 2018 and continues to advise.

Andrea Lampros, MJ, is associate director of the Human Rights Center and co-founder of the Human Rights Investigations Lab at the University of California, Berkeley. She currently serves as the Lab's resiliency manager.

Cover photo: © Alexa Koenig and Andrea Lampros, 2020.

Abstract

The Human Rights Center at the UC Berkeley School of Law launched its [Human Rights Investigations Lab](#) in Fall 2016 as a pilot project. The first university-based effort of its kind, the Lab trained a diverse cohort of undergraduate and graduate students in open source investigations. Students were trained to comb, collate, and verify digital information publicly available on the internet. Students gathered evidence of potential war crimes and human rights abuses for use by journalists, human rights organizations, and courts. In this report, we outline the Lab's structure, articulate the opportunities and challenges we faced during the pilot period, and share insights to support dissemination of this model to other universities.

In our first year, 74 UC Berkeley students from multiple academic disciplines and employing vast language skills participated in at least one of two tracks operating at the time: advocacy projects for diverse nongovernmental organizations, including Amnesty International's Digital Verification Corps (DVC),¹ and legal accountability projects for various human rights clinics and law firms, such as the Center for Justice and Accountability.

The first track focused on verification and some content discovery requests on a per-project basis. With Amnesty's support and training, our students soon worked alongside students from the University of Pretoria, the University of Essex, and the University of Toronto to respond to urgent verification and open source investigation needs. Berkeley students learned to use established and emerging methods to tackle the labor-intensive work of verifying hundreds of hours of video and other media. Students cross-checked media across sources to make sure that content shared by activists and citizen journalists with partners at Amnesty and other nongovernmental organizations could be validated as what they claimed to be.

The second track, piloted by the Human Rights Center with support from Amnesty staff and other open source experts, trained students to work on legal cases using discovery and verification tools. Working with human rights lawyers, students gathered digital evidence to expand the capacity of resource-strapped legal teams and increase the likelihood of successful prosecution and civil adjudication of human rights abusers.²

We believe this report's reflections on both tracks, including the model that finally resulted, will be useful to faculty and students at other campuses. It may also interest nongovernmental organisations and legal teams who could benefit from collaborating with university-based open source investigation labs in the future.

¹ In 2016, Amnesty International launched the Digital Verification Corps – a global consortium of university students, managed by Sam Dubberley, that were trained in sourcing and verifying online content to support the work of Amnesty researchers and their partners. The Human Rights Center's Investigations Lab was the first university partner.

² The UC Berkeley team, recognizing how rarely lawyers are trained in these mostly journalistic methods, is now working with the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to coordinate a global effort to develop standards for using open source information for legal accountability for international crimes. See *International Protocol on Open Source Investigations* (forthcoming 2020).

Table of Contents

LAB HISTORY AND OVERVIEW	1
DIGITAL VERIFICATION CORPS	4
LEGAL TRACK	5
EVOLUTION OF THE LAB	7
IMPACT AND POTENTIAL.....	9
OPPORTUNITIES.....	14
CHALLENGES.....	15
LOOKING AHEAD	16
STRUCTURE.....	16
THE HUMAN FACTOR.....	18
CONCLUSIONS.....	21
APPENDIXES	23
1. CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT.....	23
2. SEMESTER 1 SURVEY.....	24
3. DIGITAL VERIFICATION CORPS CHARTER / CODE OF CONDUCT	26
4. ADDITIONAL TOOLS & TRAINING RESOURCES	31

Lab History and Overview

Since 1994, the Human Rights Center³, based at the UC Berkeley School of Law has researched violations of international law. The Center's mission is threefold: to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of human rights investigations; to support survivors by listening to and amplifying their stories for policymakers, lawyers, and others in a position to respond; and to empower the next generation of human rights advocates by training, mentoring, and sponsoring students to work with frontline organizations.

From its inception, the multidisciplinary Center has paid close attention to emerging digital technologies to determine how they can most effectively support human rights practice. The center, led by Camille Crittenden, then-executive director, and Faculty Director Eric Stover, organized and sponsored two of the first global conferences on tech and human rights — the Soul of the New Machine in 2009 and Advancing the New Machine in 2011. In 2011, the Center began working with the International Criminal Court and a number of nonprofit partners to explore how digital technologies could be used to corroborate witness testimonies and strengthen the evidence brought into high-level prosecutions for international crimes. Stover and Executive Director Alexa Koenig then hosted a series of workshops to bring together experts from various fields and different regions of the world who could identify the potential forensic value of big data analytics, satellite imagery, social media-derived content, and photos and videos captured by citizens on smartphones.⁴ We then drew upon those workshops to identify the potential for and barriers to impact for new digital technologies. In 2015, we formalized our work in this arena by launching our Technology and Human Rights Program⁵ – advancing the Center's mission of "pursuing justice through science and law" by applying emerging technologies to our work.

³ Human Rights Center, UC Berkeley School of Law: <https://www.humanrights.berkeley.edu>.

⁴ "First Responders: An International Workshop on Collecting and Analyzing Evidence of International Crimes": https://www.law.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/First-Responders_final_with_cover5.pdf; "Digital Fingerprints: Using Electronic Evidence to Advance Prosecutions at the International Criminal Court": <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Digital-fingerprints.pdf>.

⁵ Technology and Human Rights Program, Human Rights Center, UC Berkeley School of Law: <https://humanrights.berkeley.edu/programs-projects/tech>.

Through this engagement with courts and frontline human rights investigators, our first Tech and Human Rights Director Keith Hiatt recognized a need for and an opportunity to apply the methods of open source investigation pioneered by journalists to the work of human rights researchers, investigators, advocates, and lawyers. These methods entail drawing on user-generated content made available through social media, especially videos and photographs taken in conflict zones, to expose human rights violations. We began asking how we could best address a growing need for the verification of user-generated content – labour-intensive work that human rights organizations often cannot carry out adequately on their own due to a lack of capacity.

We found ourselves in a relatively unique position to address this gap, compared to our non-university-based peers who would need to spend significant sums of money – difficult for human rights NGOs and law firms to source in even the best of times – to train and employ open source investigators. Hiatt and Koenig began to discuss how we could create a relatively high-quality, flexible, multi-disciplinary teams by drawing from the tremendous student talent on campus. Instead of salaries, we could provide students with training and academic units in exchange for their work. We could also think through a second challenge: how to engage open source methods to support legal accountability efforts. From our position at the School of Law, and given the Center’s longstanding work on adopting emerging technologies for court processes, how could we help the international legal community adapt these methods to support prosecution of high-level war crime perpetrators?

Around the time that we were incubating the idea of creating a “lab” to explore the potential use of these methods for court-related purposes, Amnesty International reached out to Koenig about launching a “Digital Verification Corps” (DVC). The DVC initiative was an effort to harness the talents on university campuses to authenticate videos, photographs, and other information provided to Amnesty by activists in the field and to support the work of their researchers. They decided to launch the initiative with three universities. We enthusiastically agreed to be the US branch of this effort, becoming the first member of the consortium, followed closely by the University of Pretoria in South Africa and the University of Essex in the UK.

Simultaneously, we finalized an agreement with the Center for Justice and Accountability to support one of their legal cases by using open source methods to conduct digital discovery and to verify and authenticate any relevant footage.

In summer 2016, Hiatt left the Center to lead Benetech's Human Rights Program; Koenig and Andrea Lampros, then the Center's communications director and a journalist by background, began meeting with various departments to recruit students from across the university. In addition to a handful of undergraduate students who had taken our class on human rights research and practice the previous spring and had expressed their interest, we set out to identify students who could help maximize linguistic diversity (especially languages we knew we would need for the legal case) and disciplinary diversity. This would enable us to create flexible, multi-disciplinary teams tailored to the projects that emerged. We met with professors and deans in departments that could provide skilled and interested students and other support, including the Graduate School of Journalism, with its new media and investigative reporting programs. We successfully registered the Lab as a research project in Berkeley's Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship Program (URAP), whereby students apply through a competitive process to assist a faculty member's research and, in turn, receive university credit.

An incredibly competitive pool of applications emerged, which we screened for interest in and commitment to human rights work, academic and professional accomplishments, disciplinary breadth, and language skills. We selected 42 students from this initial applicant pool. While the original vision was to pilot a team with approximately ten students, the tremendous need for human rights verification work combined with the overwhelming interest of our students warranted a much larger cohort and a leap of faith. We went for it.

We learned that some of our students were immigrants or refugees who had come to the United States as young children, fleeing conflicts in Central America or the Middle East. They joined the Lab with a deep desire to make a tangible contribution to human rights investigations for their families and communities. Other students had experience working with human rights groups on campus (including Amnesty and anti-trafficking organizations) and were looking for additional ways to contribute.

In late September 2016, four Amnesty researchers – Dubberley, Scott Edwards, Christoph Koettl, and Melina Marin – came to UC Berkeley to provide four days of training for students from 14 academic disciplines, including legal studies, english, biology, computer science, law, journalism, and international development. The students collectively spoke 16 languages. During half-day sessions, Amnesty experts trained students on verification processes such as geolocation, reverse image searching, collaborative report building, content discovery, and resiliency. Our Amnesty partners set up a Slack channel⁶ for communication among our various project teams (which included students focused on the DVC, Syria, and Myanmar) and for the Lab as a whole. They also set up a channel populated with puppies and funny memes to refer to for “detox” from the Lab’s emotionally difficult work.

We established a weekly group meeting to check in with the various students and teams, as well as to facilitate any supplementary training and information sharing. We carefully timed meetings and trainings to enable Amnesty partners and others – many of whom were based in time zones nine hours ahead – to participate in Skype and Slack sessions and in other collaborative efforts. From the outset, we emphasized the “start up” nature of the project, encouraging students to experiment with workflow and team management and to look critically at our processes.

Digital Verification Corps

The Lab’s projects quickly expanded. Students worked on verifying thousands of videos from Syria through the Digital Verification Corps as well as for Bellingcat⁷ and the Syrian Archive.⁸ The scenes of rubble and destruction – and sometimes, wounded people, grieving family members, and body bags – proved challenging to verify. With ongoing advice and training, students learned to use various tools and techniques. Many spent hours

⁶ Slack is a cloud-based collaboration tool that allows for instant messaging and sharing of documents across individuals and teams: <https://slack.com>.

⁷ Bellingcat, founded by Eliot Higgins, conducts open source investigations into conflicts, crowdsourcing information from individuals across the globe. See: <https://www.bellingcat.com/about>.

⁸ The Syrian Archive is a collective of Syrian activists and supporters who are collecting and curating videos and other content related to the conflict in Syria with the goal of strengthening legal accountability for crimes that may have been committed by all parties to the conflict. To date, they have collected more than 1.5 million pieces of digital content. See <https://syrianarchive.org/en>.

watching and re-watching videos to glean clues about their locations, such as mosques or shop signs, to allow for corroboration with other databases, like Google Earth Pro.

The students realized that we first needed to review and sort the videos into "easy, medium, and difficult" based on visuals and quality of footage. Was there a geological landmark, such as a mountain range, in the video clip to aid geolocation? Did any of the dialogue offer clues to date, time, or place? Or was the footage too dark or blurry to use? Was translation required? This sorting helped with time management and prioritization, ensuring that less experienced students received "easier" videos, and allowing screeners to flag particularly graphic content.

Meanwhile, a small, hand-picked team of students was asked to take on a special, time-sensitive project focused on Darfur. These students demonstrated exceptional skills in their work – particularly on translating the nuances of a political speech ostensibly related to threats of chemical weapons. The students determined that the researchers' initial characterization of the threats in the speech were not spot on. They were able to provide a more nuanced interpretation to inform Amnesty's analysis.⁹ Recognizing the Lab's capacity for these projects, Amnesty subsequently sent Berkeley students multiple quick-turnaround projects, which emerged from diverse crises around the world.

Students thus worked in small teams to provide verification and discovery for Amnesty research. We also methodically began verifying a batch of hundreds of videos from Bellingcat and the Syrian Archive, which the organizations needed to document the atrocities for reporting and future accountability. The Syrian videos served as a basic training ground for verification and geolocation and provided a solid foundation from which to begin taking on additional NGO partners and projects.

Legal Track

The Lab's legal track took off more slowly while we thought through space requirements and digital and physical security. The legal cases the Lab handles are sensitive, requiring the careful design of security plans and protocols, including a locked office with access

⁹ For more on this project and student contributions to it, see <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/amnesty-international-and-trulymedia-join-forces-in-fight-against-fake-news> and <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/09/chemical-weapons-attacks-darfur>.

controlled and tracked through university identification cards. Unlike students involved in the advocacy track, students working on the legal projects were asked to sign a “non-disclosure agreement” (NDA, included in the appendix) to ensure confidentiality with sensitive case details. Today, all participants sign an NDA and the scope of confidentiality is carefully worked out with our partners in advance.

Much of the initial work on the cases involved using open source tools for discovery. For example, students gathered information that pertained to persons of interest, social networks of alleged perpetrators, and public commentary on social media that could be documented and preserved for use in court. Students also verified videos and photographs to corroborate potential evidence. Whereas the advocacy work was primarily conducted on laptops by students at home¹⁰ and in classrooms and cafés, the legal investigations took place within the physical confines of our lab in order to protect confidentiality as well as chain of custody. Cyber security experts provided students with basic security awareness and training and regularly reviewed the feasibility of our protocols and systems. We also established pseudonymous social media accounts in order to protect students while they conducted digital discovery.

While legal cases are often slower to develop and come to fruition than advocacy research, we are beginning to understand the potential benefits of incorporating open source investigations into more traditional legal discovery. For example, after verifying a number of videos for a particular case of alleged torture, the students suggested to their lawyer partners that they could search for related content online. Before long, they had dug up numerous other videos of the particular incident on YouTube. When reviewing the content, the lawyers realized they might no longer have a simple case of domestic torture. Due to the unique pattern of torture that became evident with the expanded footage, they instead believed they might have found a pattern of behaviour that could be used to prove systematicity: one of the key elements needed to elevate a criminal act to an international crime against humanity. In another case, involving a very different part of the world, the team used social media to explore the connections between alleged perpetrators, finding critical information to link high-level commanders to those who perpetrated the crimes on the ground – an often-missing link for establishing culpability. But perhaps the most

¹⁰ This is something we now strongly discourage for a variety of reasons.

significant support the students provide is verification – helping the lawyers evaluate the trustworthiness, relevance, and possible probative value of various pieces of digital content.

Evolution of the Lab

The Lab's first semester was generally marked by energy and enthusiasm, as well as by some chaos. Treating the Lab like a startup, we truly used the first months as a pilot and sought intensive feedback about process from both the students and our various institutional partners. We engaged students one-on-one and in small group meetings as well as through anonymous feedback mechanisms, including surveys (one of which is included in the appendix) conducted at the start and end of the first semester. Many of the workflow processes we ultimately adopted were designed by the students themselves; this fostered a sense of ownership over the Lab. We also devoted a full meeting to feedback on what worked and what did not during the semester.

One student told us, "I hate to sound melodramatic, but this lab has been honestly surreal. It simultaneously feels very new and innovative and important, and often times frustrating, and I think that is amazing. I am incredibly grateful to be involved in this work." Another student told us, "Since I fled from Egypt, I had been struggling to regain a sense of family and home. I had constantly wished to have some impact on the injustice I had witnessed. In 2016, the HRC changed my life. It has become my home, my family, and my vehicle for justice."

Students gave us rich input and constructive feedback on meetings, training, projects, communication, workflow, and expectations. One student, for example, told us, "I believe that the full lab meeting should have the members talk and work with each other. Most of the lab meetings were held in a lecture style. All the members are students and have at least seven lectures a week, which I think makes it harder for them to concentrate in the meeting. It is more productive if, for example, one lab meeting is in lecture style, and the other is to make the members work or talk to each other." Other students said communication about the lab was too messy and confusing with multiple channels: Slack messages, emails, and in-class instruction. Still others said that they were frustrated that they could not do the verification or geolocation as well as some of the other students and felt left behind. We also received feedback that students wanted to know their work – which

was often quite painstaking and emotionally charged – was making a difference. In spring 2017, we emerged with many lessons learned and more to go.

We selected 60 students to participate in the Lab the following semester – 33 of them new and 27 of them returning. Those who left had either graduated, decided their academic workload was too great, or were participating in semester abroad programs. However, several of those who graduated and went abroad asked to stay involved; we have been struggling to determine how and to what extent it makes sense to have participants continue remotely and/or after graduation, whether directly or by participating in a mentorship program.

The Spring 2017 Lab consisted of graduate and undergraduate students comprising 27 distinct majors and minors (ranging from computer science to anthropology, journalism, law, sociology and economics), who spoke a collective 18 languages, ranging from Arabic (four dialects), to Bengali, Burmese, Hebrew, Turkish, Russian, Urdu, and more. During the second semester, the lab was housed in a small office at the School of Law and divided into five teams of students led by graduate student researchers or undergraduate team leaders. The teams included: Syria and special projects with Amnesty’s Digital Verification Corps; U.S. hate crimes/hate speech, which eventually fed into “Documenting Hate,” ProPublica’s¹¹ national project on hate crimes; religious discrimination in Burma; a legal case involving an extrajudicial murder in Latin America; and a case involving a series of alleged atrocity crimes in an African country whose details are confidential. All students in the Lab were expected to verify at least one video from Syria, both because of the serious need for this verification work and because the abundance of videos provided diverse opportunities to practice challenging geolocation skills.

Students were then expected to participate in one of the five teams for the duration of the semester, contributing a minimum of five hours a week. Students were able to select their teams with input from leadership. While this often worked well, we soon realized that it was better to have a higher percentage of students with some legal experience and/or more advanced experience working on the legal cases, which tended to have less formal direction and sometimes required understanding basic legal principles and legal research.

¹¹ ProPublica is an independent, New York-based, nonprofit newsroom known for its investigative reporting in the public interest. See: <https://www.propublica.org/about>. For the “Documenting Hate” project, see: <https://projects.propublica.org/graphics/hatecrimes>.

In later semesters, and as the number of both projects and students expanded, we allowed students to indicate their first, second, and third choice of project. While we tried to match every student to their first choice, we sometimes placed students with their second or third choice to ensure that we had sufficient numbers across all teams and that we matched language and methodological skills to where they were needed. Importantly, however, given the sensitive nature of the content, we allowed students to change projects at any time – no questions asked – if the change was requested for political, emotional, or other stated or unstated personal reasons.

Impact and Potential

During the 2017/2018 academic year, the Lab expanded in both capacity and focus. By spring semester 2018, we were running nine investigations across the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Central America. We were staffed by more than 80 students who spoke a collective 31 languages, including dialects, and came from some 20 areas of study. An additional 8 to 12 computer science students from the newly formed student-run nonprofit Archer had embedded with our investigations to determine what processes could be automated and where there were gaps in existing tools, as well as to learn about the open source investigations process in greater detail.¹² In 2018/2019, the lab grew to more than 90 students who worked on 10 teams – collectively contributing to 39 investigations over the course of the year.

More important than growing numbers, however, was deepening our impact on students and our partner organizations. While we are still shaping the lab, we know that the impact and potential of this type of university-based, open source investigations lab is significant. The benefits are diverse, ranging from providing valuable language skills and work hours to support nonprofit work, to training students in cutting-edge methodologies and introducing them to potential internships and future jobs, to strengthening research for both advocacy and accountability.

¹² Archer is a student-founded company comprised of thirty UC Berkeley students. Embedding Archer with our various lab teams helped result in the Archer Slackbot and in the product Meta, which launched at RightsCon in May 2018. See: <https://www.archerimpact.com>.

One key impact of the Lab is the preservation of information, including potential evidence, for future research, investigation, or litigation. Students and our institutional partners are working together to preserve videos, websites, and other digital documentation through a variety of mechanisms. These have included using platforms like Keep, Video Vault, Hunchly, and Archive.is, which helpfully preserve some indication of chain of custody – when the content was collected, how, and from what source – which is critical if the content ever makes it into court or if researchers need background information related to a particular source. For example, the Syrian videos verified by our students were reviewed by the Syrian Archive in hopes of contributing to a body of work related to future war crimes cases. Videos, photographs and other digital content have also been retained in Check, the collaborative verification system managed by one of our non-profit partners, Meedan.¹³ Over the past year, such preservation work has proven especially critical; with social media sites increasingly using automated resources to identify and remove graphic content from their channels due to potential terms of service or community standards violations, crucial information about human rights abuses has been disappearing from online sources at a new and alarming scale and speed. Thus, human rights activists are in a race against time to capture the information being sent from war zones to the outside world that may become critical to later establishing the who, what, where, when, and how of any crimes that may have been committed.¹⁴

Another critical impact of the Lab is its contribution of analysed and corroborated information for human rights reports issued by our partners – reports that are often developed and launched quickly and depend upon verified information for credibility. Some of the reports developed by Amnesty International and our other NGO partners are shared at the highest levels, including to support international bodies and commissions of inquiry that are investigating alleged war crimes and other abuses. Findings from those commissions are later used to pressure governments to stop and/or otherwise address abuses and can become critical to later legal investigations. Our U.S.-based project on hate crimes and hate speech also contributed to investigative journalism – for example, to the

¹³ See: <https://meedan.com/en/check>.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Avi Asher-Schapiro, “YouTube and Facebook are Removing Evidence of Atrocities, Jeopardizing Cases Against War Criminals,” *The Intercept*, 2 November 2017, at <https://theintercept.com/2017/11/02/war-crimes-youtube-facebook-syria-rohingya>.

national database managed by the groundbreaking investigative journalists at ProPublica. In summer 2018, students on the Myanmar team similarly contributed to a story on the weaponization of Facebook by Reuters' Steve Stecklow, which went on to win the Pulitzer Prize.¹⁵

Few, if any, human rights organizations and media outlets have the necessary experience to train staff in open source investigations or the capacity to manage and compensate a team of 80 investigators with multiple moving parts. We therefore believe our UC Berkeley lab and other members of the Digital Verification Corps have significantly contributed to heightening the capacity of the human rights field as a whole. Training and deploying students also creates a skilled pipeline of future staff for the human rights field – staff that are trained in emerging digital investigation methods and the psycho-social resiliency practices needed to mitigate some of the emotional challenges of this work. Our tech partners also benefit from user experience and user interface feedback about products they have been building to support online human rights investigations.

Our intention was to make this project as student-driven as possible; in addition to learning these cutting-edge techniques, undergraduate and graduate students from multiple disciplines staff the lab, conduct the investigations, manage small teams, develop reporting forms and workflow, and conduct verification.

Students have also played a critical role in figuring out how to make this model a win-win-win: a win for students; a win for human rights organizations; and a win for our campus, which is emerging as a leader and earning a global reputation in this field. In addition, the Lab has been a mechanism for strengthening partnerships and collaborations with other centers and disciplines across campus, breaking down the silos that often exist within universities. This not only makes our work that much more effective but fosters positive and collaborative environments on campus.

In summary, then, the benefits to our partner organizations include:

¹⁵ Steve Stecklow, "Hatebook: Inside Facebook's Myanmar Operation," *Reuters*, 15 August 2018: <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-facebook-hate/>

- Acquiring discovery and verification support from relatively large teams that they could never afford to hire, absorbing hundreds of hours of pro-bono support;¹⁶
- Benefitting from language skills that they might not have on staff;
- Supplementing their traditional investigations with open source techniques when they do not already have those skills on staff; and
- Acquiring an increased knowledge of the potential of open source methodologies for their work when they do not already have that in-house expertise;
- Earning new and valuable opportunities to work with students on a temporary basis, allowing them to screen for exceptional future interns and employees (in several cases, students have been asked to intern or work for our partner organizations after graduation or during summer break).

The benefits to students include the following:

- Opportunities for students of various disciplines and backgrounds to learn cutting-edge open source investigation techniques, which are in increasingly high demand with human rights nonprofits, media outlets, law firms, and courts. To date, students graduating from the Lab have gone on to join such diverse and prestigious organizations as Amnesty International, Bellingcat, the International Criminal Court, and the New York Times, bringing these critical skills with them.¹⁷
- Cross-disciplinary and departmental collaboration that can generate an understanding of how experts in computer science, law, sociology, journalism, and language programs can work together to positively impact human rights and to acquire methodologies from outside their chosen field.
- Access to the world's top investigators, reporters, and technologists, building critical networks for training, internships, and jobs.

¹⁶ We have found these partnerships work particularly well when there is regular communication between the partner organization and the student team. This ideally includes at least one or two in person meetings and weekly video conferences.

¹⁷ Gretchen Kell, "Doctor, Lawyer, Open Source Investigator? New Field Plucks Berkeley Grads," *Berkeley News*, 1 May 2019, <https://news.berkeley.edu/2019/05/01/this-one-doctor-lawyer-open-source-investigator-new-field-seeks-berkeley-grads/>

- Academic units, as the majority of students in the lab receive undergraduate or graduate-level credit.
- Work-study and paid graduate student researcher positions, as a handful of students – those who assist the lab managers as graduate student researchers and student team leads – are also paid at work-study and graduate student researcher rates.
- Training in detecting “fake news,” and other kinds of misinformation and disinformation as well as media verification and authentication skills, increasing their ability to be responsible producers and consumers of news.
- New tools for developing resiliency in human rights work – to manage emotional responses to graphic content involving war and human rights violations.
- Opportunities to make real-world impact on pressing human rights crises.
- Greater gender and geographic diversity in their chosen field: Through the Lab, female students have a mechanism for breaking into the previously male-dominated field of open source investigations and computer science, shifting an historically lopsided field and bringing more female leadership into STEM practice and related spaces (a benefit not only to those students but to these fields). Through our partnership with the Digital Verification Corps and the opening of new units in the global East and South, projects like these are also helping to support geographic and ethnic diversity in the field.
- An unexpected, but surprisingly important benefit for students has been the sense of community fostered by the lab. Several students have mentioned that the lab has provided them with a “home” on an otherwise large and sometimes impersonal campus. Our first student community officer, Mazelle Etessami, was especially helpful to thinking through how to strengthen that sense of community, which we’ve increasingly recognized as an important component of helping students through the emotional aspects of this work. This has involved a system for getting to know students in the Lab outside of the team structure and even purchasing team gear such as sweatshirts, water bottles, and stickers with our Human Rights Center logo.

More broadly, and beyond the immediate impact to students and our partner organizations, we are sensitizing students who aren't headed to human rights organizations or media outlets to human rights needs. One challenge we've historically seen is technologists who want to make a contribution to the human rights space but have a weak understanding of human rights practice and thus are creating apps and other products that may have little impact at best, and at worst might endanger those they are designed to serve. For example, digital technologies designed to be downloaded to smartphones might endanger the user if the app in question is detected on that phone and gives away that they likely work with a human rights organization or an opposition group. By embedding computer science and engineering students into our day-to-day human rights efforts, we are helping to cross-pollinate understandings of how the world works. The technical students are learning more about the social and cultural aspects of their work, while the socially science, humanities, and law students are learning more about the possibilities and limitations of digital technologies as applied to their chosen field.

Opportunities

From day one, the Lab has been a relatively low-cost, high-impact program. The lab has required high-skilled but relatively minimal professional staff to train and manage student leaders and ultimately empower student volunteers to conduct the day-to-day work.¹⁸

Initially, the Lab was launched by faculty and staff at the Human Rights Center, who devoted a significant portion of their time to training students, managing student leads, coordinating relationships with partners, and administering the Lab. We brought in experts as paid consultants to conduct verification work directly with students (offering trainings in digital discovery for the full team or to work one-on-one with students attempting to verify videos, for example) and to assist ongoing skill development. Those experts have ranged from specialists in geospatial analysis to archiving best practices. Some were technologists, others were legal experts, and still others journalists. In addition, we have

¹⁸ Kim Bui joined our team as an independent contractor to help with student training on and off throughout the Spring 2017 semester.

infused the Lab seminars with expert presentations on cybersecurity, discovery, corporate data research, data visualization, ethics,¹⁹ and more.

Most of the work done through the Digital Verification Corps could be conducted on students' own computers at a relatively low risk. Therefore we did not have expansive computer or infrastructure costs – although that is changing. While we experimented with installing virtual machines on all of the students' laptops, we moved to using a closed email and document management system that allows for us to closely monitor incoming and outgoing resources and to separate student's academic work (and virtual world) from that of the Lab. Finally, funds for snacks and occasional happy hours to facilitate team communication and bonding have also proven important.

Challenges

Human rights cases can be some of the most sensitive in the world since numerous lives may be at stake and as they often involve probing the lives of individuals at their most traumatized or otherwise vulnerable. As a result, we spent significant time during our first semester thinking through how to structure the lab to best safeguard civilian witnesses as well as our students, our clients, the university, and any others who might be put at risk through our efforts.

One of our biggest challenges has been securely transferring information between computers and ensuring consistent access to this information since our teams are relatively large and turn over fairly regularly (with some overlap). Additional space and more equipment was needed to maximize efficiency. Due to the small lab space, multitude of projects, and confidentiality of some cases, the Lab had to be shut down to general participant access during particular "office hours." The legal cases needed the space to ensure that students could speak freely about particulars without compromising security or confidentiality.

While we had support from the UC Berkeley School of Law for security training for students, developing cybersecurity protocols for our students and clients remains an

¹⁹ One of our students, Leenah Bassouni, became our ethics manager for the 2018-2019 school year, helping us build an ethical framework for our daily operations and contributing to an international effort to establish a code of ethics for open source practice.

ongoing challenge. A grant from the Center for Long-Term Cyber-Security enabled us to do an independent assessment of our security protocols and to map a way forward.²⁰

In addition to the space and security concerns, time also posed a challenge. While all students were supposed to complete at least five hours a week (and some did quite a bit more), we had to develop self-reporting mechanisms for tracking hours, determine barriers to meeting weekly goals, and help students to overcome those constraints. Finding a day and time for our weekly meeting was difficult to coordinate across disciplines, each of which has its own schedule. Also difficult was timing the meetings to accommodate our European, Asian and African partners. The transitory nature of student life means we need to be prepared for both short term and long term investments as students may participate for a semester, a year, or more. Given that a portion of our mission is pedagogical, even having students participate for one semester (often translating to just ten weeks of work) may have a powerful and positive long-term impact. One of our short-term participating students, for example, went on to conduct open source investigative reporting for a major news outlet, a position that he said resulted from his work with the Lab.

The academic cycle itself must also be considered; numbers of participating students drop significantly during the summer months and at various points during the academic year, for example during midterms and finals, which may conflict with clients' deadlines and human rights crises.

Looking Ahead

In the several years since the launch of the Lab, our “lessons learned” are extensive. Some of the most critical takeaways relate to 1) structure and 2) students (the “human factor”).

Structure

While we (Koenig and Lampros) initially tried to be involved in each of the teams' daily work, this proved impossible as the number of projects grew. The only way to cope with the scale was to delegate certain lab participants as “team leaders” and give them

²⁰ Many of the takeaways from that assessment were captured in a later book chapter drafted by the researchers. See Joseph Guay, with Lisa Rudnick, “Open Source Investigations: Understanding Digital Threats, Risks and Harms,” in Sam Dubberley, Alexa Koenig and Daragh Murray, eds., *Digital Witness: Using Open Source Information for Human Rights Documentation, Advocacy and Accountability* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2019).

ownership over their projects. The unanticipated benefit of this structure has been to acknowledge the efforts of high performers and particularly dedicated students and to empower them to train other students.

This structure has also enabled significant experimentation and innovation on everything from workflow to team structure to resiliency practices to document management to security protocols. In Spring 2017, we started a weekly meeting for the team leaders – in addition to the full lab meeting – to discuss challenges and successes with the lab’s co-directors. The student managers have since taken primary responsibility for the day-to-day workflow (including weekly team meetings and conducting introductory trainings), while the directors primarily deal with big picture challenges and opportunities, partner development, fundraising, and coordination across teams and across the campus. These weekly meetings enable professional staff and student managers to set priorities, troubleshoot, and further develop skills in both open source investigative techniques and team management.

In February 2018, we hired Félim McMahon, who has a long track record in open source investigations (from Storyful to the International Criminal Court), to lead our Technology and Human Rights Program, including the Lab, and provide additional capacity. When McMahon was called back to his post at the ICC in 2019, we hired another seasoned open source investigator and geospatial analyst, Stephanie Croft, to oversee investigations and mentor students.

In experimenting with staffing models and structures since year one, we believe a collaborative, hands-on, student-centered approach to teaching and training is the most effective. Each of us – undergraduates and graduates, faculty and staff, practitioners and partners – has something to contribute. Being an “expert” on a topic has little to do with title, age, or employment status. We believe the strength of our community and impact have deepened because of this more egalitarian structure.

Executive Director Alexa Koenig now leads the Center’s technology and human rights work and teaches our undergraduate lab class and graduate seminar, with Stover, Lampros (who manages the resiliency program), and incoming lab manager Croft.

Even as staffing has increased, the lab’s structure and model have been “student-led” in many respects, which has ultimately led to greater engagement and skill-building. In

addition, students have benefited from a partnership model, whereby every member of every team works with a partner or small group. This means that students can help each other through difficult processes (reducing frustration and increasing creativity), serve as peer reviewers to each other's work (enhancing the quality of the resulting analysis), and watch out for each others' mood or behavioural changes, which might suggest a need for a break or additional support.

To maximize participation during the weekly meeting, in the fall 2017 semester we formalized the Lab as a class comprised of a seminar and a practicum, with the seminar functioning as the weekly large group meeting and work hours serving as the practicum. There are, unfortunately, some negatives to this new arrangement, namely less flexibility in deciding when the group will meet and the future need to generate the buy-in of deans from disparate departments in order to cross-link the course. However, the ability for students to organize their semesters and prepare for the group meetings in advance balanced any negatives by reducing confusion around scheduling and facilitating greater participation and group cohesion.

The Human Factor

One of the most important lessons we've learned is the need to take the "human" side of this work seriously. Especially critical is early and repeat training and continued messaging regarding emotional resilience. Reviewing and verifying hours upon hours of graphic footage takes an emotional toll, particularly on students who have had little previous exposure to this kind of work. In response, we have made resilience training mandatory for all participants. In the pilot year, we had at least one large group training of a minimum of two hours at the start of each semester, led by our partners at Amnesty and their colleagues. New participants were required to complete the training before starting work; returnees were strongly encouraged to do so (it is now mandatory to participate each semester). We have since tapped Andrea Lampros as an "in-house" resiliency manager to lead training each semester, facilitate mid-semester conversations, work with student managers on making resiliency plans for each investigation, and developing a holistic and ongoing resiliency program for the lab.

We created and posted a sign for our lab reminding students of the key resiliency practices, emphasizing three "buckets" of resiliency and the tactics that can be employed to foster each. These include greater awareness of one's own and others' responses and behaviours, as well as ensuring "outlets" (taking breaks, watching cute or funny videos, getting sleep and exercise – see list in appendix); technical safeguards that can be integrated into one's workflow (such as turning off sound when watching videos, minimizing screen sizes, and blocking out particularly graphic imagery); and building community, which minimizes the risk of isolation and any related distress.

Central to greater resilience is the awareness component, which entails both self-monitoring and monitoring of one's teammates. We conducted one-on-one meetings with particularly active lab participants, especially after they finished intense projects, and required written check-ins from everyone. Most importantly, however, we created an environment in which experiencing and expressing some degree of distress was considered both "normal" (to be expected) and a sign of strength. This counters the traditional practice of both students and human rights employees to be stoic and to mask any emotional reaction in favour of appearing "professional." As has been repeatedly noted and warned, human rights workers have traditionally used alcohol or gallows humor to cope with the emotional impact of their jobs.²¹ We repeated that resiliency is like being in a plane with technical challenges and the need for putting on one's oxygen mask before placing it on one's child: in order to effectively take care of others one must first take care of one's self.

Also key has been letting students know that a major component of responsible practice is recognizing when a particular project is unexpectedly affecting them in unusually negative ways, and making it clear to those students that they may pivot to another project at any time, as needed. It has been interesting to watch students' response to projects and how difficult it is for them to anticipate which ones will be empowering and which ones will be particularly psychologically difficult. For some students, working on topics that have directly impacted their families or themselves is empowering; for others, those are the hardest to endure, though that is often difficult for them know in advance. We have also encouraged awareness of each other; partnering all lab participants has empowered

²¹ See, e.g., Keramet Reiter and Alexa Koenig, "Challenges and Strategies for Researching Trauma," at <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/social-science-matters/reiter-and-koenig-on-researching-trauma>.

students to check in with each other and to give the lab's manager and director a heads-up if a student seems to be struggling.

While this work can be emotionally difficult, it also provides critical and supervised exposure to the emotional side of human rights practice and an opportunity for students who are considering long-term work in the field to develop psycho-social strength. Students are given an opportunity to do meaningful work that can be hard to handle; at the same time, they are given tools to be actively resilient to the secondary trauma that can come with this work. We believe this is a life-lesson that will serve students throughout their careers, whether they are explicitly doing open source investigations or carrying out other types of human rights work.

Human rights investigations have shifted over the last two decades such that an increasing percentage of work is done in front of a computer screen instead of on-the-ground in a conflict zone. Training has not caught up with that revised reality: Traditional preparation does not include how to deal with viewing large quantities of graphic imagery over extended periods of time, and most present-day human rights managers underestimate the potential danger to individuals doing this work since they are out of "physical" harm.²² The lab also provides an opportunity to discuss and develop resiliency in ways that have long been neglected in the human rights space where people were simply expected to "man up or get out." Hopefully, we can help foster a new generation of human rights advocates who are more prepared for this kind of work than their predecessors.

Also important, however, is the need for what is known as "ground truthing" – that is, relying on on-the-ground partners such as country-based field workers, local journalists, or in-country investigative partners to corroborate findings and fill gaps in information. Overall, we have a "no contact" policy, meaning that students are not supposed to reach out to in-country partners without supervision. This is in order to help safeguard their identities and to minimize the potential of inadvertently interfering with an investigation in

²² An important analogy is to drone pilots. In early stages, it was assumed that such pilots who were located far from any battlefield were "safer" than those who physically flew over their targets. However, social science research increasingly suggests that the psychological toll of watching targets for days on end, so that a sense of familiarity develops, and witnessing the destruction of those targets and their families and communities close up, means that the toll may be even greater. See, e.g., Sarah McCammon, "The Warfare May be Remote But the Trauma is Real," NPR, 24 April 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/04/24/525413427/for-drone-pilots-warfare-may-be-remote-but-the-trauma-is-real>.

ways that may be problematic. However, finding additional corroborative sources can be helpful, whether conducted by students or at a later stage by our professional partners, as long as this is feasible and relatively safe for all involved. Digital investigations should not be viewed as a replacement for on-the ground human rights workers, but rather as a supplement – another tool to help strengthen the human rights networks that already exist and to maximize the accuracy and efficacy of the information that is available.

Last but not least, we are dedicated to creating a community, a welcoming space where students from different backgrounds and majors can find an engaging home on the large and potentially impersonal UC Berkeley campus. Students decorated the lab with the slogan, "If you want to fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together," and often ate snacks or meals together. Starting in the fall 2017 semester, we provided each team with a modest budget that they could use to go out to dinner as a team or have other bonding experiences. We end each year with a ceremony to honour the graduates, often saying a few words and writing a personal card to each. We have managers' celebrations in one of our homes, providing an opportunity to share a home-cooked meal and reflect on the semester. The payoff of long hours is the meaningful work, sense of solidarity and collegiality derived from collaborating with our partners, and building of networks.

To encourage a positive environment for both ethical and humanitarian reasons, Amnesty International also created a code of conduct to which we contributed and circulate to all participants each semester (included in appendix). This helps ensure the long-term sustainability of such efforts. We want the lab to be a place that not only challenges everyone who participates, including us, but also is a place that feels like home.

Conclusions

In June 2017 at the conclusion of the lab's year-one, we hosted three gatherings to bring the lessons learned from this pilot year to a broader audience: a Digital Verification Corps Student Summit²³ with students from the Berkeley, University of Essex, University of Toronto, University of Pretoria, and University of Cambridge campuses to foster cohesion and refine the corps' day-to-day practices; a one-day workshop to discuss how to "blueprint"

²³ See "Digital Verification Corps Student Summit," https://www.law.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Summit_report_2017_final4.pdf.

the model for replication to other campuses, hopefully helping these institutions benefit from our lessons learned and avoid some of the startup costs; and an international workshop consisting of 19 professional criminal investigators and human rights workers at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center to advance standards for using open source investigations reports as evidence in international courts. The workshop laid the groundwork for a process the Human Rights Center is leading to develop international guidelines for using online open source information as evidence for legal accountability.²⁴ In addition, Koenig and Dubberley have been working with the head of the University of Essex DVC team, Daragh Murray, to edit the world's first textbook on using open source information for human rights documentation, advocacy and accountability – a project to which many of our partners have contributed.²⁵ Finally, we are producing a handbook that summarizes our structure and processes as a potential resource for others.

In sum, the lab has proven an exciting space for collaboration and innovation on everything from workflow to resiliency to experimentation with new investigation and research methods and the technologies that are being developed to foster the flow of information. While we are still experimenting with the most efficient and effective structure, we are optimistic about this project's potential to train a new generation to engage with digital resources to advance human rights and international justice more generally. This pioneering lab and our work with the Digital Verification Corps students worldwide create unprecedented opportunities for students to find and verify facts amid the colossal onslaught of information in our new digital age. The Lab empowers students to innovate with technology and investigative techniques, contribute to human rights investigations in meaningful ways, and innovate means of information gathering and analysis. We see this as a new age and style of student engagement with the world – one that will continue to serve human rights organizations, universities, courts, the public, and the students themselves for years to come.

²⁴ See "The New Forensics: Using Open Source Information to Investigate Grave Crimes," https://www.law.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Bellagio_report_2018_9.pdf.

²⁵ Sam Dubberley, Alexa Koenig and Daragh Murray, eds. *Digital Witness: Using Open Source Information for Human Rights Documentation, Advocacy and Accountability* (University of Oxford Press, forthcoming 2019).

Appendices

1. Confidentiality Agreement



UC Berkeley School of Law

Human Rights Investigations Lab Confidentiality Agreement

Maintaining confidentiality is of critical importance to the Human Rights Investigations Lab (Lab). The Lab is, among other things, an investigations unit that has legal and ethical responsibilities that require that Lab participants not share information about legal cases and issues from being shared outside the Lab and its legal partners. As part of student and professional work in the Lab, students and professionals affiliated with the Lab will have access to confidential or privileged information related to the Lab and its clients (collectively referred to below as "Confidential Information"). This agreement provides that, as a condition of allowing students and professionals to work in the Lab with access to the Lab's computers or other systems, all students and professionals agree to strictly protect any Confidential Information they receive as a result of their work with the Lab.

The undersigned student and/or professional agrees that he or she shall not violate the confidentiality of the Lab's interests or those of the Lab's clients by revealing Confidential Information to those outside the Lab. By signing this agreement, the student and/or professional agrees not to disclose Confidential Information orally or in writing, including through electronic media or any online forum, and not to write about any aspect of a Lab case or project in any print or online publication without the express, prior permission of the Lab's supervising faculty and professional staff. The obligation of each student to maintain the confidentiality of information is on-going and continues after his or her participation in the Lab has ended.

While the decision about whether information is Confidential Information depends on the specific information itself, some examples of Confidential Information include:

- The names of clients, defendants, witnesses, or other persons related to a case, or information likely to indicate identity;
- Any information related to attorney work-product, litigation strategy or expectations, or research or policy findings and recommendations;
- Any private communication or information regarding a specific client, a case, research data or analysis, including any underlying facts and circumstances not already revealed to the public;
- Any memoranda of law or other written material, including that which the undersigned has drafted, unless such document has been approved for release and properly redacted by a Lab supervisor.
- Identities or other personal information about research subjects required by applicable research protocols to remain confidential to minimize the risk to research subjects of participation in research.

Lab faculty and professional staff are available to answer any questions or concerns about this Agreement, or about disclosure of any specific information. Students and/or professionals who are uncertain about whether certain information is Confidential Information should ask Clinic faculty and/or professional staff before any disclosure.

I have read this Agreement and agree to abide by its terms.

Date

Signature

Name



Full List of Survey Questions

1. Productivity of the full lab meeting (scale + explanation)
2. Productive of the legal team meeting (scale + explanation)
3. Productivity of the DVC meetings (if applicable) (scale + explanation)
4. Logistics and communication (scale + explanation)
5. What do you think about the meeting rooms and lab space? (answer + explanation)
6. Availability of open source experts (online or in person) (scale + explanation)
7. How did Slack work for you? (scale + explanation)
8. How did you feel about the trauma training? (scale + explanation)
9. How did Check work for you?
10. Please briefly share the best part of your experience with the lab
11. Please share your biggest challenge with participating in the lab
12. What would you like us to improve?
13. How do you feel about the promise of this work at Berkeley? (scale + explanation)
14. I would like to continue to be involved with the lab next semester or in the future (yes, no, maybe + explanation)
15. Additional comments

3. Digital Verification Corps Charter / Code of Conduct

Amnesty Digital Verification Corps
Charter for Team Members

Project Overview:

The Amnesty International Digital Verification Corps has been established at UC Berkeley's Human Rights Center (HRC) to assist Amnesty International researchers to use content sourced from social media sources that may depict human rights violations by discovering and verifying it. Due to the proliferation of smartphones, improved internet and mobile phone networks and open social media platforms, events are increasingly first reported on social media. However, verifying that the content found on social media truly depicts what it is said to is often a time-consuming endeavour, requiring specific skills. This is where the Digital Verification Corps comes in.

As a member of the Digital Verification Corps, you will be working at the cutting edge of contemporary human rights investigations with the potential to influence future research into human rights violations. This is a new, but critical field of human rights research and monitoring. Demand for the open-source investigation skills that will be developed through participation in the Digital Verification Corps is also growing amongst grassroots and international human rights organisations. Participation will give you this applied knowledge and involvement in the real research work of a major international human rights organisation.

However, use of the skills you will learn as part of the Digital Verification Corps and the content you will be exposed to is not without danger – both to yourself and to others. The purpose of this charter is to guide you in the ethical and safe use of user-generated content, away from doing harm and towards doing good with the information you find.

Key Principles to This Charter:

1. Professionalism

We are really happy to have you as a member of the Digital Verification Corps – however, this comes with a couple of requirements from us that are designed to protect the quality of the research, your safety and the safety of others.

I, Content discovered for the Digital Verification Corps needs to be handled with utmost care and meet the conditions set out here. Do not share such content on your own private social media networks without agreement from Amnesty International and the HRC.

II, The decision to release information – even verified and corroborated – requires risk assessment: What human “assets” are in harm’s way? How might means or methods of investigation be compromised? How might timing impact the behavior of potential perpetrators or victims? Without all available information, you will rarely be in a position to make these assessments alone.

III, Do not speak publicly on behalf of Amnesty International or the HRC without prior approval.

IV, Any public output from the Digital Verification Corps needs to be in agreement with Amnesty International and the HRC.

V, Human rights investigation takes its cue from the application of internationally accepted standards regarding objectivity. You may encounter content or situations that you do not agree with personally. However, human rights apply to all and it’s critical that you approach content neutrally.

2. If in Any Doubt, Ask

As a key guiding principle any questions or doubt about a piece of eyewitness content (be that about its veracity, about rights, about the uploader) should be rapidly reported to the leadership of the Digital Verification Corps – either within HRC or to Amnesty directly. Do not feel that you will ever be disturbing the leadership of the Digital Verification Corps by asking such questions – this is their role, it is what they are there for.

3. Verification is Key

We must confirm the authenticity of any uploaded material before we redistribute it. We must never use material with the caveat that “the authenticity of this content could not be immediately verified.” In the first instance we must judge if an image rings true. We must check with the source. We must make every possible effort to verify the image and ownership with the author or the subject of the material, and ensure the following: 1) Location: Does the image show the location that the source claims it does? 2) Time: Does the video or photo correspond to the date and time claimed? 3) Source: Is the source's identity and authorship confirmed? 4) Publication: Has the photo or video been previously published and/or is it exclusive? 5) Copyright: Is the image protected and if so what are the legal terms of use?

4. Uploader Safety Comes First

We are in a position to do good, but we're also in a position to do harm.

Often people do not realise that a video or photograph they have captured contains sensitive information. The person who created the content may not be aware it has been posted online. If the person who created the content did post the video online, they may not be aware that their content is visible to the whole world. You must understand that, if you decide to disseminate or otherwise use a video, the source and creator may be targeted for it – even if they have never interacted with the Digital Verification Corps. Those featured in the materials may not have consented, or even been aware that they were being filmed. If you publicly reveal their faces or names in the context of a human rights violation, you may inadvertently cause them to be harassed or further abused. In the event that you publicise the data, or there is an external breach, the source and featured individuals may be at increased risk of physical harm even if their information was already posted online. Worse, it may be difficult to inform any of the at-risk individuals of the heightened risk, as the researcher is unlikely to have contact information or other means of reaching those identified.

Therefore, when we are using content discovered online, we need to think of:

1, Informed consent – Attempt to get consent from uploaders, and, if you are able, ensure they are giving it voluntarily, that they fully understand what they are consenting to, and that they're in a position to make these kinds of decisions.

2, Data minimisation – In the interests of privacy and lowering risk, always attempt to collect the minimum amount of data necessary for your specific purpose.

3, Personal data – Whenever possible, if you have names, dates of birth or other personally identifiable information, try to de-identify the image or delete what you don't need.

Also consider the six key principles of using content discovered online that have been established by Eyewitness Media Hub. These are:

- Consider the physical and emotional welfare of eyewitnesses.
- Be transparent; explain where and when the content will be used.
- Think of the intent of the eyewitness when uploading content.
- Consider the potential impact on any person identifiable in the video or photo.
- Ask if and if so how an eyewitness wants to be credited.
- Work to make sure the eyewitness feels fairly treated.

5. Ensure Your Safety and That of Your Team

As with any human rights investigation, we are potentially discovering stories and content that will make some governments unhappy. This could leave you and your colleagues at the risk of being trolled online. Be careful about what you say, and what information you reveal about yourself. Also, with the monitoring of human rights violations, we are potentially exposing ourselves to viewing distressing videos and photographs. Ensure you follow training advice on secondary trauma and build tools that work for yourself to build

resilience. Also, keep an eye on your colleagues and their exposure to violent and distressing imagery. Talk to leadership at HRC or within Amnesty International if you are concerned about your own reactions to viewing distressing content or the reactions of your colleagues and teammates.

6. Communication through the Slack Channel

Communication with the Digital Verification Corps is through Slack. This makes communication transparent and easy for all. However, this comes with the responsibility to keep your communication linked to the work of the Digital Verification Corps. It is not a space for political opinion or the sharing of non-DVC related content (except for the Detox channel, which is intended for light-hearted content). Please do not share distressing images in the general DVC discussion channel, and, if you must do so in smaller groups on Slack, do not share without appropriate and ample warning.

Again, if in doubt on any of this, please follow principle number 2 and ask for assistance.

4. Additional Tools & Training Resources

This is a small sample of the resources and both in person and online training programs available for those new to open source investigations:

Amnesty International Citizen Evidence Lab:

<https://citizenevidence.org/category/verification-corps/>

Bellingcat Online Investigation Toolkit:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BfLPipRtyq4RFtHJoNpvWQjmGnyVkfE2HYoICKOGguA/edit>

Bellingcat Training Guide:

<https://www.bellingcat.com/category/resources/how-tos/>

Berkeley's Human Rights Center and Institute for International Criminal Investigations Joint Open Source Investigations Trainings:

<https://iici.global/courses/>

Data Journalism Basics:

<https://datajournalism.com/watch/verification-the-basics>

First Draft News Verification Curriculum:

<https://firstdraftnews.org/en/education/learn/>

Human Rights Center Blog:

<https://medium.com/humanrightscenter>

Paul Myers' Research Clinic's Open Source Investigative Research Links & Articles:

<http://researchclinic.net/>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

COPYRIGHT: Alexa Koenig and Andrea Lampros, 2019

CITATION: Koenig, Alexa and Andrea Lampros, 'The Human Rights Investigations Lab: Reflections from our Pilot Year,' *Human Rights in the Digital Age: CGHR Practitioner Papers*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Centre of Governance and Human Rights, 2020.