University of Essex
Human Rights Centre

Human Rights Centre Clinic

Digital Verification Corps:
Open Source Intelligence & Suspected
Human Rights Violations

Amnesty International

Project Overview

From videos of rights violations, to satellite images of environmental degradation, to eyewitness accounts disseminated on social media, human rights practitioners have access to more data today than ever before. To say that mobile technologies, social media and increased connectivity are having a significant impact on human rights practice would be an understatement. Modern technology – and the enhanced access it provides to information about abuse – has the potential to revolutionise both human rights reporting and documentation, as well as the pursuit of legal accountability. Human rights organizations are using these new technologies in innovative ways. The availability of cheap mobile image sensors and improved network connections means that human rights investigations not only take place 'in the field', but are increasingly conducted in head offices and other remote locations.

However, these new methods for information gathering and dissemination have also created significant challenges for investigators. For example, videos and photographs depicting alleged human rights violations or war crimes are often captured on the mobile phones of victims or political sympathisers. The capture and dissemination of content often happens haphazardly and for a variety of motivations, including raising awareness of the plight of those who have been most affected, or for advocacy purposes with the goal of mobilising international public opinion. For this content to be of use to investigators it must be verified and authenticated. Verification and authentication have, therefore, become critical skills for human rights organisations and international human rights lawyers.

The Human Rights Centre Clinic team will work with Amnesty International's Digital Verification Corps. The Digital Verification Corps has been established to assist Amnesty International researchers as they seek to verify and authenticate open source information that may depict violations of international human rights law or international humanitarian law. This verification process requires specific skills and expertise: this is where the digital verification corps comes in.

Following training on various digital verification techniques members of the digital verification corps will assist Amnesty International in the verification and authentication of open source intelligence. Individual verification projects will differ; some will require a speedy turnaround in order to respond to emerging events, others will form part of a more long-term campaign. This is the second year that the Digital Verification Corps has run at Essex, following a hugely successful first year.

Project Utility

The Essex Digital Verification Corps will be working at the cutting edge of contemporary human rights investigation 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 Essex 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. These skills will be essential to human rights documentation and accountability processes going forward, and you will be working on emerging human rights issues.

Previous Examples of Social Media Verification in Human Rights Research

Examples of social media that have required verification and have had an impact within Amnesty International in the past include:

Syria – Russian Airstrikes
Using verified eyewitness video, Amnesty International was able to challenge the claim by the Russian government that its air strikes had not harmed civilians. The video verified by Amnesty shows that the strikes do appear to have actually killed hundreds of civilians and destroyed or damaged hospitals and dozens of homes and other civilian objects.
Output: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/3113/2015/en/

Burundi Mass Graves
Verified eyewitness video footage was used by Amnesty International to corroborate other evidence (from satellite images, and witness accounts) that dozens of people killed by Burundian security forces in December 2015 were later buried in mass graves. Without the verified eyewitness video, Amnesty International would not have been able to use the satellite evidence alone.
https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/01/burundi-satellite-evidence-supports-witness-accounts-of-mass-graves/

See also the following more recent examples:
- https://medium.com/lemming-cliff/in-the-firing-line-how-amnestys-digital-verification-corps-changed-official-narratives-through-23aee8bf415d?source=collection_home---4------1----------
- https://medium.com/lemming-cliff/where-on-google-earth-fc27f323a556?source=collection_home---4------6----------
- https://medium.com/lemming-cliff/digital-verification-and-the-battle-for-aleppo-55d004f289d5?source=collection_home---4------10----------

Who Is Involved?
The Digital Verification Corps will be managed by Sam Dubberley. Sam is co-founder of Eyewitness Media Hub and research fellow of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University. He is an expert in social media verification. Sam is based in Berlin and is the main point of contact for this project. The project will be run by Dr. Daragh Murray.

Further members of the Digital Verification Corps will come from Berkeley University Human Rights Centre in the United States, Pretoria University Human Rights Centre in South Africa, and the University of Toronto Human Rights Centre in Canada. The Essex team will work on projects both independently and in collaboration with students from other universities.

Project Output

This project has two main outputs:

- Digital Verification: the project team will engage in the verification and authentication of open source intelligence with Amnesty International. This will continue throughout the academic year until the end of June 2017.
- Development of an Open Source Knowledge Base: One of the challenges when conducting verification of open source intelligence is the absence of teaching and learning materials. The 2016-17 clinic team produced an initial 'how to' guide that provides a basic introduction to open source verification. This year's team will build on this work by producing a number of blog pieces detailing how verification was conducted in relation to specific case studies. These blogs will address particular verification challenges and how they were overcome.

Project Outline:

1. Late October/early November 2017: Open source intelligence for human rights investigation training - **attendance compulsory for participation in the project**. Two days of training with experts on verification, ethics and discovery. This will cover use of software for the project, awareness of trauma and viewing distressing imagery. Attendance to the training is compulsory for participants. This training will be conducted with a new verification corps being established at Cambridge University. Training is likely to occur over the weekend of 4 and 5 November.
2. Ongoing: weekly meetings with Essex HRC / AI project leader (to be conducted online). Attendance is compulsory.
3. Each participant is required to write a minimum of two blog posts to be published on Amnesty's website: www.citizenevidence.org and the human rights centre blog. This can be a case study of verifying a particular piece of content (i.e. steps taken to authenticate or debunk a piece a video or photograph), a lesson learnt etc.
4. Regular presence (2 to 3 times a week) in the online tools used for this project - Slack / Check Desk (TBC).
5. Project report. This will be comprised of the blog posts, together with an introduction including a description of methodology and a conclusion that highlights findings, project impact and recommendations. In addition to the blog posts, the other elements of the report will be no more than 5 pages in total. The draft report will finalized by 30th April.
6. End of June 2017: End of project and completion of all tasks.

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Project Bibliography:

"Ethical Guidelines: Using Eyewitness Videos in Human Rights Reporting and Advocacy", WITNESS
http://www.mediafire.com/download/pbahxdv48bi3m01/VaE_Ethical_Guidelines_v1_2.pdf

Citizen Media Research and Verification: An Analytical Framework for Human Rights Practitioners by Christoph Koettl
https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1810/253508/Koettl_Citizen%20Media%20Research%20and%20Verifcation_FINAL%20%281%29.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

I work on the Digital Frontline – how should I protect myself from the traumatic content I'm seeing?
S. Dubberley
https://citizenevidence.org/2015/12/18/protecting-yourself-from-trauma-on-the-digital-frontline/\

Mobile Phones, Social Media and Big Data in Human Rights Fact-finding: Possibilities, Challenges and Limitations, Aronson J, in The Transformation of Human Rights Fact-finding, Alston & Knuckey eds, Oxford University Press 2016