

OPEN-SOURCE INTELLIGENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

Responsible Faculty Instructor:
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Credits: 4

Credits Type:

Cross-registration: yes

Pre-requisites: None

COURSE DESCRIPTION (COURSE VISION):

The use of open-source intelligence has transformed human rights investigation and advocacy. Where documentation of atrocities once depended almost exclusively on witness testimony and physical evidence gathered in the field, investigators today can identify perpetrators, geolocate events, and verify footage using nothing more than publicly available digital sources such as social media posts, satellite imagery, commercial databases, and the metadata embedded in photographs and videos. This course equips undergraduate law students with the practical skills and legal knowledge necessary to conduct and critically evaluate open-source investigations in human rights contexts.

Over fourteen modules, students will develop hands-on competence in the core techniques of OSINT practice from foundational research methods and social media investigation to geolocation, satellite imagery analysis, and digital media verification. A dedicated case study module examines Bellingcat's landmark investigation into the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, widely regarded as the most consequential open-source investigation in the history of human rights accountability. The legal dimensions of OSINT are woven throughout: students will engage with questions of admissibility, authentication, and chain of custody, and will examine how open-source evidence has been used before the International Criminal Court, the European Court of Human Rights, and in domestic litigation. The course concludes with a mock-investigation in which students apply their skills to a human rights issue of their choice.

TEACHING METHODOLOGY:

This course combines several complementary teaching methods to develop both legal knowledge and practical investigative competence. Lectures introduce the conceptual, legal, and ethical frameworks that underpin each topic, providing students with the analytical tools needed to engage critically with OSINT practice. These are supplemented by hands-on practical sessions in which students work directly with open-source tools and real-world datasets, building technical skills progressively across the course. Text-based discussions invite students to engage closely with key readings, including legal scholarship,

investigative reports, and practitioner-produced protocols such as the Berkeley Protocol. Regular quizzes reinforce and consolidate knowledge, and the course culminates in a capstone investigation that requires students to integrate practical skills with legal and ethical reasoning.

INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Knowledge

- Students can explain the legal and ethical framework governing the conduct of open-source investigations, including the standards set out in the Berkeley Protocol, and identify the rights and obligations that apply to investigators working in human rights contexts.
- Students can describe the core techniques of open-source investigation — including geolocation, chronolocation, satellite imagery analysis, social media investigation, and digital media verification — and explain how each has been applied in significant human rights investigations.
- Students can explain the legal standards governing the admissibility and authentication of digital open-source evidence in international and domestic human rights proceedings, and account for the development of relevant practice in key tribunals and courts.

Competence

- Students can conduct a structured open-source investigation into a human rights issue, applying appropriate research methodologies, verification techniques, and ethical safeguards, and presenting their findings in a form suitable for use in legal or advocacy contexts.
- Students can critically evaluate the findings of open-source investigations, assessing the reliability of sources, the robustness of verification methods, and the legal and ethical dimensions of investigative decisions.
- Students can analyse the admissibility of digital open-source evidence in a given legal proceeding, identifying the applicable standards and anticipating the challenges that such evidence is likely to face.

READING LIST (UP TO 10 SELECT READINGS):

1. Human Rights Center, UC Berkeley & OHCHR, Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open-Source Investigations (United Nations, 2022).
2. Bellingcat Investigation Team, 'MH17 – The Open Source Evidence' (Bellingcat, October 2015), available at <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/10/08/mh17-the-open-source-evidence/>.

3. Daragh Murray et al., 'Mapping the Use of Open Source Research in UN Human Rights Investigations', *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 14(2) (2022), 554.
4. Nikita Mehandru & Alexa Koenig, 'Open Source Evidence and the International Criminal Court', *Harvard Human Rights Journal* (2019).
5. Sam Dubberley, Alexa Koenig & Daragh Murray (eds.), *Digital Witness: Using Open Source Information for Human Rights Investigation, Documentation, and Accountability* (Oxford University Press, 2020).
6. Alexa Koenig, 'Ethical Considerations for Open-Source Investigations into International Crimes', *American Journal of International Law* (2024).
7. Eliot Higgins, *We Are Bellingcat: An Intelligence Agency for the People* (Bloomsbury, 2021).
8. Quirine Eijkman, 'Open Source Intelligence and Privacy Dilemmas: Is it Time to Reassess State Accountability?', Research paper (2013).
9. Deniz Mykola Dirisu, 'OSINT in Civil Law: Shifting from Prosecution to Compensation', *Opinio Juris* (October 2025).
10. Giancarlo Fiorella, 'Notes from the Digital Field: Ethical Dilemmas in Open Source Research', *Bellingcat* (September 2023).

WEEKLY READING PLAN (WEEKLY OUTLINE):

A weekly plan is provided below:

MODULES	WEEK(S)
<p>MODULE 1: INTRODUCTION TO OSINT AND HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY</p> <p>This module introduces the concept of open-source intelligence, tracing its origins from traditional intelligence practices to its contemporary role in human rights documentation and advocacy. It examines the organisations and individuals that have pioneered OSINT-based investigations, including Bellingcat, Amnesty International's Digital Verification Corps, and the UC Berkeley Human Rights Centre, and considers why digital open-source investigation has become indispensable to modern human rights practice.</p>	Week 1
<p>MODULE 2: LEGAL AND ETHICAL FRAMEWORK</p> <p>This module establishes the legal and ethical boundaries within which open-source investigations must operate. It examines the tension between effective human rights documentation and</p>	Week 2

<p>the rights of individuals to privacy and data protection. Students will engage with the Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open-Source Investigations, which sets out minimum standards for the ethical collection, preservation, and use of digital open-source information in human rights, international criminal law, and humanitarian investigations.</p>	
<p>MODULE 3: FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH TECHNIQUES This module introduces the practical building blocks of open-source research: advanced search operators, web archiving tools such as the Wayback Machine, reverse image searching, and source verification techniques. Students will practise using these tools to locate, preserve, and assess the reliability of digital information relevant to human rights investigations.</p>	<p>Week 3</p>
<p>MODULE 4: SOCIAL MEDIA INVESTIGATION Social media platforms constitute one of the richest sources of open-source information for human rights investigators. This module examines how investigators identify, collect, and verify content from platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Telegram, and TikTok. It addresses the analysis of account metadata, the detection of coordinated inauthentic behaviour, and the legal and ethical considerations involved in using content posted by private individuals.</p>	<p>Week 4</p>
<p>MODULE 5: GEOLOCATION AND CHRONOLOCATION Geolocation and chronolocation are among the most powerful techniques available to human rights investigators, enabling the precise placement of events in space and time using visual and contextual clues. This module provides hands-on training in both techniques, drawing on real-world examples from conflict zones and human rights crises. Students will practise identifying landmarks, shadows, vegetation, and other environmental indicators to verify the location and timing of photographs and videos.</p>	<p>Week 5</p>
<p>MODULE 6: SATELLITE AND AERIAL IMAGERY ANALYSIS Satellite imagery has transformed the capacity of investigators to document events, from mass atrocities to environmental destruction, that would otherwise be invisible. This module introduces students to the use of commercial satellite imagery platforms, including Google Earth and Planet Labs, and examines how imagery analysis has been used in landmark human rights investigations. Students will develop skills in</p>	<p>Week 6</p>

<p>comparing imagery across time to detect changes on the ground.</p>	
<p>MODULE 7: DIGITAL MEDIA VERIFICATION The proliferation of manipulated and synthetic media poses significant challenges for human rights investigators. This module examines methodologies for detecting image and video manipulation through forensic analysis tools and techniques for identifying deepfakes and AI-generated content. It also considers the broader landscape of disinformation and the ways in which state and non-state actors seek to discredit or undermine legitimate open-source investigations.</p>	<p>Week 7</p>
<p>MODULE 8: CASE STUDY — MH17 AND THE BELLINGCAT INVESTIGATION This module provides an in-depth examination of Bellingcat's open-source investigation into the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine in July 2014 — one of the most significant OSINT investigations in the history of human rights documentation. Students will analyse the investigative methods used, including social media analysis, geolocation, and satellite imagery, and consider how Bellingcat's findings were subsequently verified by the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team and used in legal accountability processes.</p>	<p>Week 8</p>
<p>MODULE 9: OSINT AS LEGAL EVIDENCE — ADMISSIBILITY AND AUTHENTICATION The value of open-source investigation depends ultimately on whether its findings can be used in legal proceedings. This module examines the admissibility of digital open-source evidence in human rights and criminal proceedings, focusing on questions of authentication, chain of custody, and probative value. It draws on the Rome Statute framework and the evolving practice of international criminal tribunals, as well as developments in domestic jurisdictions.</p>	<p>Week 9</p>
<p>MODULE 10: OSINT IN INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS This module examines how open-source evidence has been used in proceedings before international human rights bodies, including the European Court of Human Rights, UN fact-finding missions, and the International Criminal Court. It considers the institutional frameworks within which such evidence is received, the challenges of verification and</p>	<p>Week 10</p>

<p>attribution, and the procedural rules that govern its use in different fora.</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">MODULE 11: OSINT IN DOMESTIC HUMAN RIGHTS LITIGATION</p> <p>While much attention has focused on international mechanisms, open-source evidence is increasingly being used in domestic courts to support human rights claims. This module examines the use of OSINT in domestic litigation across different legal systems, including civil and common law jurisdictions, and considers the procedural and evidentiary challenges that arise when digital open-source evidence is introduced in national proceedings.</p>	<p>Week 11</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">MODULE 12: PROTECTING SOURCES AND INVESTIGATORS</p> <p>Open-source investigators working on sensitive human rights cases face significant personal and professional risks, including surveillance, harassment, and legal threats. This module addresses the digital security practices that investigators must adopt to protect themselves and their sources, and considers the ethical obligations that investigators owe to individuals who appear in, or are otherwise implicated by, their research. It also examines the legal protections available to investigators in different jurisdictions.</p>	<p>Week 12</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">MODULE 13: EMERGING CHALLENGES — AI, DEEPPAKES, AND THE FUTURE OF OSINT</p> <p>Rapid technological change is reshaping both the possibilities and the challenges of open-source investigation. This module examines the implications of artificial intelligence, large language models, and synthetic media for human rights OSINT, considering both how these technologies can assist investigators and how they are being weaponised to generate disinformation and evade accountability. It also addresses the challenge of investigating human rights violations in encrypted or otherwise inaccessible digital spaces.</p>	<p>Week 13</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">MODULE 14: STUDENT PRESENTATION ON OSINT INVESTIGATIONS</p> <p>In the final module, students present the findings of an open-source investigation into a human rights issue of their choice. Drawing on the practical skills and legal knowledge developed throughout the course, students are expected to demonstrate competence in research methodology, source verification, and the legal and ethical dimensions of their investigation.</p>	<p>Week 14</p>

REVISION WEEK	Week 15