# SE301 Evidence and Inquiry:
# Open-source Research for Human Rights

Seminar Leader: Fred Abrahams, Marija Ristic
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Times: Monday, 14:00-17:15
Office Hours: after class or by appointment

## Course Description

This course introduces students to the rapidly evolving field of open source investigations, including the tools and techniques to document and expose human rights violations. Beginning with a survey of the field, including the origins and developments of open source research, the course offers hands-on training in the skills needed to discover, preserve, verify and present evidence of abuse, with a continued focus on ethical considerations, digital security and the well-being of researchers. Using investigations from human rights groups, media, and courts, the course will critically assess the impact and limitations of open source research in advancing accountability, rule of law and social change. Guest speakers from Berlin and elsewhere will share their insights and expertise.

## Requirements

- Attend class having read or watched the assigned material.
- Participate in discussions.
- Submit assignments on time.
- A spirit of critical inquiry.

### Academic Integrity
Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to always adhere to these standards. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

### Attendance
Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation. If additional absences are sought, please speak with the instructor in advance.

Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

### Assignments
Thoughtfully complete all assignments given in the class, plus the digital investigation presentation.

**Policy on Late Submission of Assignments**

Assignments that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept assignments that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late submission, it must be handed in within four weeks of the deadline. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

## Grade Breakdown

**1. Class Participation and Exercises 50%**
Students are expected to engage actively in class discussions, group work and exercises by coming prepared, asking questions, offering comments, and contributing to a collaborative learning environment.

**2. Assignments (25%)**
Three assignments throughout the semester will cover the core skills of open source research taught in the course, such as discovery, preservation and verification.

**3. Final Assignment (25%)**
Working in small groups, students will conduct and present a digital investigation on a pre-approved topic that shows a human rights abuse.

## Schedule
The schedule might change due to the availability of outside speakers. Advance notice will be given.

**Week One**
*Monday, January 27*
COURSE INTRODUCTION AND SYLLABUS REVIEW
Introduction to open source research for human rights.

Readings:
Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations
Digital Witness, Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2

Case studies:
Death at the Station, Human Rights Watch
German Colonial Genocide in Namibia: Shark Island, Forensic Architecture

**Week Two**
*Monday, February 3*
DISCOVERY
How to find what you need in the ocean of websites, datasets, social media platforms and more.

Readings:
"How to Conduct Discovery Using Open Source Methods," Chapter 6 in Digital Witness by Paul Myers

Case studies:
[Navigating Libraries and Archives for Investigations](), Tactical Tech
[Myanmar Witness](), Center for Information Resilience

**Week Three**
*Monday, February 10*
PRESERVATION
How to save, download and secure what you need.

Readings:
["Video Unavailable": Social Media Platforms Remove Evidence of War Crimes](), Human Rights Watch
"[YouTube Is Erasing History]()," Hadi al-Khatib and Dia Kayyali, New York Times Opinion Video

Case studies:
"The Syrian Archive: A Methodological Case Study in Open-Source Investigation of State Crime Using Video Evidence from Social Media Platforms," by Jeff Deutch in *State Crime and Digital Resistance*, pages 46–76.
"[Why Former Content Moderators in Kenya are Taking Legal Action,](]" *The Guardian*

Guest speaker

**Week Four**
*Monday, February 17*
DIGITAL SECURITY
How to protect yourself and others when doing open source research.

Readings:
[Your Security Plan](), Electronic Frontier Foundation
[Security in a Box](), Tactical Tech

Case studies:
[The Pegasus Project](), Amnesty International
[Iran: State-Backed Hacking of Activists, Journalists, Politicians](), Human Rights Watch

**Week Five**
*Monday, February 24*
VERIFICATION I
How to cross-check, corroborate and confirm digital information. Foundational skills such as reverse image search, geolocation, and metadata analysis.

Readings:
"Tracking Human Rights Abuses through Online Open Source Research*"* by Benjamin Strick in *Open-Source Investigations in the Age of Google,* pages 27 -48
"How to Verify and Authenticate User-generated Content," Chapter 9 in Digital Witness by Aric Toler
[Proving Patterns of Cruelty from Afar](), Human Rights Watch

Case studies:
[Tear Gas: An Investigation](#), Amnesty International
[Strikes on Journalists in Lebanon Apparently Deliberate](#), Human Rights Watch

**Week Six**
*Monday, March 3*
VERIFICATION II
Advanced skills such as remote sensing, chronolocation, audio verification, network analysis, and 3D modelling.

Readings:
"The Role and Use of Satellite Imagery for Human Rights Investigations," Chapter 10 in Digital Witness by Micah Farfour
[Satellite Imagery for Human Rights Monitoring](#), The Engine Room

Case studies:
[Time Will Tell](#), Human Rights Watch
[Iran protests](#), Amnesty International
[Saydnaya: Inside a Syrian Torture Prison](#), Amnesty International and Forensic Architecture

**Week Seven**
*Monday, March 10*
TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE
How to manage working with disturbing imagery

Readings:
"Policy and Practice: What Next?" by Alexa Koenig in *Graphic,* pages 105-130
"[Evidence and Trauma: the impact of human rights work on advocates](#)," by Meg Satterthwaite, Open Global Rights
"[How to Maintain Mental Hygiene as an Open Source Researcher](#)," by Giancarlo Fiorella, Bellingcat
Listen to [Dealing with Secondary Trauma](#), Asymmetrical Haircut podcast

Guest speaker

**Week Eight**
*Monday, March 17*
ETHICS OF OPEN SOURCE RESEARCH
Deciding what one can and should do with open source research.

Readings:
Sam Dubberley  and Gabriela Ivens, "Outlining a Human-Rights Based Approach to Digital Open Source Investigations: A Guide for Human Rights Organisations and Open Source Researchers," University of Essex, Human Rights, Big Data and Technology Project.
"Ethics in Human Rights Investigations," Chapter 11 in Digital Witness by Zara Rahman and Gabriela Ivens.

Case studies:

Hunting the Hunters: How We Identified Navalny's FSB Stalkers, Bellingcat
Israeli Military Must be Investigated for the Crime of Wanton Destruction, Amnesty International

**Week Nine**
*Monday, March 24*
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTING
The rewards and risks of using AI to document and expose abuse.

Readings:
Audiovisual Generative AI and Conflict Resolution: Trends, Threats and Mitigation Strategies, WITNESS
"Weapons of War, Tools of Justice: Using Artificial Intelligence to Investigate International Crimes," by Lindsay Freeman, Journal of International Criminal Justice

Case studies:
A Times Investigation Tracked Israel's Use of One of the Most Destructive Bombs, New York Times
Behind a Secretive Global Network of Non-Consensual Deepfake Pornography, Bellingcat
"Harnessing large language models to surface data buried in wrongful conviction case documents," Innocence Project and Human Rights Data Analysis Group
Beneath the Surface: gender-based violence and policing, Invisible Institute
Machine Learning and UPRs, HURIDOCS.

**Week Ten**
*Monday, March 31*
DIGITAL OPEN SOURCE EVIDENCE IN COURTROOMS
How open source research contributes to justice

Readings:
Evaluating Digital Open Source Imagery: a Guide for Judges and Fact-finders
"Expert Evidence and Digital Open Source Information," by Matthew Gillett and Wallace Fan in *Journal of International Criminal Justice*.

Case studies:
ICC Digital Platform: Mali, SITU
Racist Terror Attack in Hanau: The Police Operation, Forensic Architecture
Killings and Refugee Flow in Kosovo March-June 1999, Report to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, AAAS and ABA CEELI
Virtual Reality to Aid Auschwitz War Trials of Concentration Camp Guards, BBC

Guest speaker

**Week Eleven**
*Monday, April 7*
OPEN SOURCE METHODS AND JOURNALISM
How the media is using and advancing open source investigations.

Readings:
"Images of Transgressions: Visuals as Reconstructed Evidence in Digital Investigative Journalism," by Frederik Bjerknes *in Journalism Studies* 23, pages 951–73.

Case studies:
[Built to Last: detention and incarceration in Xinjiang](#), BuzzFeed News
[Duterte's Drug War Killings: Cases Closed, No Action](#), Rappler
[Caught on Camera, Traced by Phone: The Russian Military that Killed Thousands in Bucha](#), New York Times
[How Extremist Settlers Became the Law in West Bank](#), Financial Times
[Missing in Chicago](#), City Bureau and Invisible Institute


**Week Twelve and Thirteen – Spring break**


**Week Fourteen**
*Monday, April 21*
OPEN SOURCE METHODS I
- Weapons analysis
- Investigating perpetrators

Guest speaker

Readings:
"[Current OSINT Applications for Weapons Monitoring and Verification](#)," by Dan Liu and Zuzanna Gwadera *in Open-source Investigations in the Age of Google,* page 259

Case studies:
"[Open Source Munitions Portal](#)," Airwars
"[A Village Destroyed,](#)" Human Rights Watch
"[You Feel Like a Subhuman,](#)" Chapter 7, Amnesty International


**Week Fifteen**
*Monday, April 28*
OPEN SOURCE METHODS II
- Investigating environmental crimes
- Investigating companies and corporations
- Investigating migration and refugees

Readings:
"[Leveraging Emerging Technologies to Enable Environmental Monitoring and Accountability in Conflict Zones](#)," by Wim Zwijnenburg and Ollie Ballinger in *International Review of the Red Cross* 105, no. 924 pages 1497–1521

Case studies:
[Submerged: destruction of the Kakhovka Dam](#), Truth Hounds
[Detecting Yemen's Informal Dumpsites from Space, Conflict and Environment Observatory](#), Conflict and Environment Observatory
[Saudi Arabia: Mass Killing of Migrants at Yemen Border](#), Human Rights Watch

[Pandora Papers](), International Consortium of Investigative Journalists
[Drowning in Lies](), Lighthouse Reports

**Week Sixteen**
*Monday, May 6*
DIGITAL INVESTIGATIONS PRESENTATIONS

**Week Seventeen – Completion week**