

BOOK REVIEW



Digital Witness: Using Open Source Information for Human Rights Investigation, Documentation, and Accountability

Edited by Sam Dubberley, Alexa Koenig and Daragh Murray*

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To gain a full picture of the field of open-source human rights investigation, documentation and accountability, it is necessary to leave the comfort of one's own professional or academic discipline and to delve into the whole range of specialties that are called into action when human rights work is undertaken online. The book *Digital Witness: Using Open Source Information for Human Rights Investigation, Documentation, and Accountability*, edited by Sam Dubberley, Alexa Koenig and Daragh Murray, allows readers to do precisely this. The first of its kind, it is a long-awaited resource that brings together the many elements that make up this field, and is essential reading for anyone interested in open-source

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human rights work. From readers who operate daily in this space to those pursuing a nascent curiosity, *Digital Witness* will prove valuable across the board.

Digital Witness brings together practitioners and academics who specialize in different areas of open-source human rights work. Their contributions are divided across the four sections of the book. The first section sets out the contextual landscape of open source human rights work with chapters on the theory, history and sociology of the field.² The second section populates this landscape with technical know-how, offering chapters dedicated to particular practical skill sets—from how to find open-source material relevant to human rights work, to how to preserve and archive it.³ The third section could be termed the “conscience of the book”, as it deals with what open-source investigators owe to others and to themselves. From the perspectives of ethics and security, the chapters in this section discuss the risks that open-source human rights work poses to those about whom information is collected and processed, and how these risks can be mitigated.⁴ Importantly, the book includes a discussion of the risks facing open-source investigators themselves, both psychologically and in terms of security. In the fourth and final section, the two concluding chapters turn to the future of open-source human rights work, setting out the groundwork for how the field can move forward in a constructive way.⁵

In addition to being a rich source of information in a fragmented field, perhaps *Digital Witness*’s biggest success is the way in which it bridges the gap between the practical and the academic, between the personal and the technical, and between different disciplinary fields. The range of knowledge and specialities required to operate effectively in this field has long been a challenge for those working within it, who are required to assume various roles, sometimes simultaneously.

Beginning with the practical and the academic, this traditionally entrenched gap is bridged in the book by the bringing together of information types that would normally be placed at opposite ends of a library. Take, for example, the explanation of how search syntax works in Chapter 6.⁶ In his chapter on how to discover relevant open-source material online, Paul Myers takes the reader through the ways in which the results given by a search engine can be narrowed down and tailored using particular search terms (also known as Boolean operators). In an academic book, one might expect such an explanation to foreshadow a theoretical or academic argument (about the overwhelming nature of the online information environment, perhaps). However, here the purpose of the explanation is simpler: the aim is to instruct the reader in how to

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2 *Digital Witness*, Part I, Chaps 1–5.

3 *Ibid.*, Part II, Chaps 6–10.

4 *Ibid.*, Part III, Chaps 11–13.

5 *Ibid.*, Part IV, Chaps 14, 15.

6 Paul Meyers, “How to Conduct Discovery Using Open Source Methods”, in *Digital Witness*, pp. 109–111.

conduct a search. Sitting comfortably alongside practical chapters of this type are the more traditionally academic chapters. Chapter 1, for example, tracks the history of using open-source investigations for human rights reporting, grouping the developments together into different categories, and using case studies to support the authors' description of events.⁷ A natural but interesting consequence of this bridging of the academic and the practical is that the edited volume as a whole draws on a great diversity of sources. In *Digital Witness*, a reference to an academic article is as much at home as a screenshot of a Google search or a reference to an interview with a practitioner.

Turning to the bridge between the personal and the technical, this is achieved—at least in part—through the amalgam of writing styles featured in *Digital Witness*. As the different chapters oscillate between narrative, theoretical and instructional styles, the book does justice to the human side of open-source human rights work while still engaging with the technical necessities. In Chapter 2, for example, Alexa Koenig adopts a storytelling style to take the reader on the journey of the evolution of open-source human rights work in legal accountability.⁸ Told through the stories of those working in the field, this aptly named “Modern Social History” chapter tracks developments in international and domestic accountability proceedings. The reader comes to know the names of these individuals, along with their struggles and successes. This narrative style contrasts with the theory-rich Chapter 4, in which Ella McPherson, Isabel Guenette Thornton and Matt Mahmoudi frame the rise of open-source investigations as a “knowledge controversy” that is shifting the standard practices of human rights fact-finding.⁹ The technical chapters in Part II of the book are different in style once again, with the adoption of an almost step-by-step guide approach. Even within these instructive chapters, the human side of the field is kept in focus; in Chapter 10, for instance, Micah Farfour illustrates the value of satellite imagery analysis for human rights investigations by taking the reader through a number of case studies.¹⁰ Alongside discussion of spatial and spectral resolution are examples of human rights abuses affecting particular communities, with descriptions of how these abuses are visible from above.

Last but not least, the driving force behind the two bridges just described is the book's multidisciplinary. A legal scholar would easily recognize Lindsay Freeman's overview of the use of open-source evidence in international criminal prosecutions in Chapter 3; an ethics scholar would be familiar with Zara Rahman and Gabriela Ivens' discussion in Chapter 11 of the ethics involved in open-source human rights work. In order for the book's bridging of different

7 Christopher Koettl, Daragh Murray and Sam Dubberley, “Open Source Investigation for Human Rights Reporting: A Brief History”, in *Digital Witness*, pp. 12–32.

8 Alexa Koenig, “Open Source Evidence and Human Rights Cases: A Modern Social History”, in *Digital Witness*, pp. 32–48.

9 Ella McPherson, Isabel Guenette and Matt Mahmoudi, “Open Source Investigations and the Technology Driven Knowledge Controversy in Human Rights Fact Finding”, in *Digital Witness*, pp. 68–87.

10 Micah Farfour, “The Role and Use of Satellite Imagery for Human Rights Investigations”, in *Digital Witness*, pp. 228–249.

disciplines to work, the traditional divides between the academic, practical, personal and technical must necessarily be set aside. The success of doing so in an effective way rests on how accessible information is to those approaching it from another field. While some parts of the text are (perhaps inevitably) dense and complex, the book achieves the accessibility and readability required to reach a broad audience.

As with any work that crosses disciplinary boundaries, readers seeking specialized information from a particular disciplinary perspective will not necessarily find the depth they need for an expert understanding. A lawyer, for example, may wish for greater attention to be paid to the legal dimensions of the field, and for legal discussion such as that featured in Chapter 3 to be found extensively elsewhere in the book too. This, however, is not a weakness of the book, but a consequence of its positioning within the field – it should be seen as a central point in the information environment from which specialized strands of knowledge can grow, rather than the pinnacle of the information pyramid.

An important caveat present throughout the book is that open-source techniques are not the silver bullet that will solve all challenges in the investigation and documentation of human rights abuses, nor in holding perpetrators accountable for such abuses. Several chapters mention that open-source information can be valuable to the extent that it corroborates other forms of evidence, such as witness testimonies, and stresses that open-source information must always be corroborated. The introduction to the book relates what could be called the quintessential example of the importance of open-source material, as it takes the reader through an analysis of a social media video showing extrajudicial killings by the Cameroonian military.¹¹ Even here, where there is a highly compelling video, the writers make clear the importance of speaking to witnesses and of travelling to the site of the killings in order to be sure of their findings. Chapter 14 is largely dedicated to this message, as it describes open-source information as one piece of the investigation puzzle: to leave it out risks an incomplete investigation, but to rely on it too much risks a biased one.¹²

An unfortunate drawback of writing in any technology-related field is that the pace of developments quickly renders the material outdated. Those reading *Digital Witness* in 2020 will experience it at its most relevant, whereas readers who come to it later may need to cross-reference with newer writings to ensure their knowledge is current. The book format is particularly susceptible to this problem, and edited volumes perhaps even more so. The time required for the editors to coordinate a diverse range of authors into updating and resubmitting their chapters for a new edition, combined with the processing time of the publisher, makes for a cumbersome and slow task. This challenge will affect some

11 Sam Dubberley, Alexa Koenig and Daragh Murray, “Introduction: The Emergence of Digital Witnesses”, in *Digital Witness*, p. 3.

12 Fred Abrahams and Daragh Murray, “Open Source Information: Part of the Puzzle”, in *Digital Witness*, pp. 317–331.

parts of the book more than others. McPherson, Thornton and Mahmoudi’s theory-based chapter on how human rights work is living through a knowledge controversy will likely remain relevant for some time to come, as will Alexa Koenig and Lindsay Freeman’s suggested guiding principles for the future of open-source human rights work in Chapter 15.¹³ This contrasts with the practical chapters in Part II of the book, a number of which reference tools and resources that may come and go with time.

Digital Witness fills an important gap in the information ecosystem surrounding open-source human rights work. It renders the field accessible in a way that it has not been to date, by opening up all aspects of it – the academic, the practical, the personal, the technical – to actors who may otherwise have only been exposed to one or two of them. It is to be hoped that it is the first of many editions to come, and that it will act as a springboard for further research in the field.

13 Alexa Koenig and Lindsay Freeman, “Open Source Investigations for Legal Accountability: Challenges and Best Practices”, in *Digital Witness*, pp. 331–323.