UC SANTA CRUZ — Human Rights Investigations Lab for the Americas

The Human Rights Investigations (HRI) Lab at UC Santa Cruz is training the next generation of human rights digital investigators to source and verify online content, making a critical contribution to strengthen the quality of digital research in the 21st century.

Seeking to serve the public interest, the social justice mission of the HRI Lab is to partner with non-governmental organizations, news media outlets, and other human rights advocacy partners to track and monitor ongoing humanitarian, environmental, and socio-political crises throughout the Americas through the use of open-source investigations.

"Being part of the Human Rights Investigations (HRI) Lab at UC Santa Cruz has been one of the most rewarding experiences I've had in college. The HRI Lab was the place where my personal experiences and everything I learned in my majors could be put into practice. It gave me the confidence to consider pursuing a career in human rights work and also the opportunity to learn an entirely new set of research skills." **- Undergraduate student researcher, 2023**

"Open source investigations rely, in whole or in part, on publicly available information to conduct formal and systematic online inquiries into alleged wrongdoing (Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations, pg vii). Common types of open-source information available online for digital investigations include the following: online news articles, expert and NGO reports, social media content, image and sound recordings, and geospatial imagery and mapping data.

Students learn how to collate and synthesize this open-source information systemically for the purposes of research and become skilled in digital investigative techniques, including the following:

- **Discovery:** conducting targeted online searches to find statements, videos, images, or other open-source information to support human rights cases.

- **Geolocation:** identifying the coordinates of a video or image in order to verify its authenticity.

- **Chronolocation:** identifying the exact or approximate time in which a video or image was taken.

- **Network analysis:** identifying the interrelationship between perpetrators, victims, organizations, and governments.

- **Digital mapping:** producing data visualizations that can expose connections between human rights violations, locations, perpetrators, and the relevance of these data points.

Some of the greatest threats to global democracy are witnessed online when people post about human rights abuses, when community leaders are targeted through online campaigns to delegitimize their social causes, and when conspiracy theories run amok about a global pandemic and political leaders.

Thus, making sense of a daily deluge of photographs, videos, and social media posts, amplified by the power of the internet, requires that people have the capacity to distinguish between fact and fiction. In other words, the power of the internet is evident when videos or images of alleged human rights abuses go viral, flooding digital and social media networks, and resulting in public outcry. Its power is also apparent when shallow fakes, deep fakes, disinformation, and conspiracy theories gain traction, and those posts become especially dangerous when they target, for example, human rights defenders and their causes.

The HRI Lab is housed at the Dolores Huerta Research Center for the Americas at UC Santa Cruz and forms part of the UC Network for Human Rights and Digital Fact-finding, alongside the Human Rights Center at the University of California Berkeley and the Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA School of Law.

The UC Network's goal is to position the University of California as the global academic hub for cutting-edge digital research and investigations—intentionally cultivating a diverse pipeline of students to use new and emerging technologies to tackle the world's greatest human rights challenges, while providing critical capacity to public-interest fact-finders worldwide.

Founded in 2019 by Dr. Sylvanna M. Falcón, Associate Professor of Latin American and Latino Studies, the HRI Lab at UC Santa Cruz offers students a transformative learning opportunity to gain hands-on research experience.

A scholar of human rights for over two decades, Dr. Falcón has provided research oversight for over twenty digital investigations conducted at UC Santa Cruz, ranging from monitoring police violence in Latin American uprisings, the spread of election disinformation narratives in the United States, supervised the creation of online resiliency modules for human rights investigators, and has successfully won several external competitive grants.

Graduates from the HRI Lab have gone on to obtain highly competitive jobs at Media Matters for America, democracy think tanks in Washington, DC, and pursued graduate studies, including in the top law schools (UC Berkeley, Stanford).

The annual cost to operate the Lab is approximately $500,000. Expenses include staff salary and benefits (Lab Manager, Lab Coordinator), hiring student leaders, consulting with digital security experts, purchasing of equipment for low-income students, offering multi-day training on digital investigations, student recruitment, traveling to present and network at conferences,and summer salary for faculty director.

Contact Director Falcón at smfalcon@ucsc.edu or hrlab@ucsc.edu to learn more about how you can support this critical work.

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