

Information Security in Environmental Movements (IS-EM)

Mikaela Brough

Royal Holloway, University of London

mikaela.brough.2022@live.rhul.ac.uk

Abstract

Information security researchers are interested in understanding the security practices and perceptions of people involved in social movements. This body of work highlights the need to understand the individual and collective desires of activists who explicitly rely on secure systems, prompting serious inquiries into the experiences of threat that affect members of these movements. Environmental social movements (ESMs) present an arena characterised by variable levels of risk from both state and private actors. In the UK, for example, recent legislative changes restrict disruptive protests and extend digital policing powers, while in the Philippines, members face threats such as judicial harassment/arrest, digital monitoring, state 'red-tagging' (being labelled as subversive) and potential violent retaliation. The challenge is to understand how members of ESMs in these radically different but politically sensitive contexts manage their security, not just through technology, but within the broader cultural, political and social landscapes that shape their vulnerabilities and strategies.

This thesis explores how members of environmental social movements navigate their information security in politically sensitive contexts. To do this, I take a multi-sited, engaged ethnographic approach in both the Southern Philippines (PH) and the United Kingdom (UK). This approach involves formal and informal interviews, embedded observation through extended fieldwork, and generally working with participants in ways that they feel benefit them. Data from the UK includes semi-structured interviews (n=19), a workshop (n=1) and participant observation (approximately 325 hours), conducted intermittently from 2023-24. Data collection in PH is currently in progress, with two periods of fieldwork, one in summer 2024 and the second from winter to early summer 2025. Findings from this thesis highlight micro-level cultural and social dimensions of environmental movements, with a focus on how groups communicate internally, collaborate externally, exchange security knowledge, perceive adversaries and their behaviour, and manage threats in their daily activities. Overall, this thesis stresses the complexity of information security research in relation to social movements, and raises fundamental questions about how scholars can develop security in context, from the ground.