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We Are Bellingcat: An Intelligence Agency for the People

By Eliot Higgins

Reviewed by Wing Commander Paul Withers

In the aftermath of the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH-17 over eastern Ukraine in 2014, the world attempted to make sense of what had happened and who was responsible. Confusion was interlaced with deliberate disinformation, and amongst those piecing together the evidence was a group of open-source investigators known as Bellingcat. This excellent book shows the importance of open-source techniques as a means of deriving veracity amongst a flood of falsehoods, but also offers the reader a fascinating insight into wider information warfare.

Bellingcat has propelled the author, Eliot Higgins, from being a bored office administrator, college dropout and online gamer, to being a highly influential open-source investigation specialist and expert witness. In addition to chairing the Bellingcat executive board, Higgins has held positions as a research fellow at the University of California, Berkley and as a member of the International Criminal Court's technical advisory board.

The book begins with Higgin's personal journey in online verification which started in August 2011, when posting a comment to newspaper blog. After linking to footage of rebels purportedly occupying the Libyan town of Brega, Higgins was challenged by another commentator who argued an important point: the footage could have been taken anywhere. Higgins set to work sketching a map of the footage and then trying to meticulously match every visible feature with Google Maps. In doing so, he produced his first geolocation, something that later became a foundation of the Bellingcat method.

This early success led Higgins to create his own blog and his focus became fixed on attributing attacks on civilians in the Syrian Civil War, leading him to become a self-taught weapons expert. As the conflict in Syria escalated, getting authoritative independent news became more difficult. However, hundreds of hours of uploaded amateur video emerged from the conflict, material that was able to paint a picture, but lacked verification. Surely nobody had the time or inclination to trawl through this tsunami of online content? Higgins and a growing community of volunteers did, and their results have been quite remarkable.

Higgins describes how his loose network of collaborators grew to the point where he was able to crowdfund a new online platform, invite others to join, and set the standards for open-source research by publishing a set of 'how to' guides. The platform set itself the motto 'identify, verify, amplify': identify issues, verify all evidence without speculation, and amplify what they learned, whilst also amplifying the field of open-source investigation through education. The group's name, Bellingcat was derived from Aesop's fable, *Belling the Cat*, where a group of mice discussed fixing a bell to a cat to warn of the predator's approach, concluding with the question: Who will bell the cat?
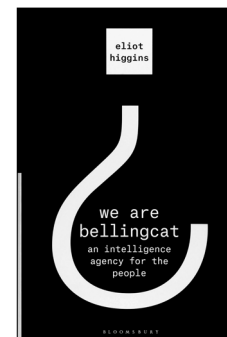
Bellingcat was founded three days before the downing of MH-17 and was to play a pivotal role in verifying the movements of the Russian Buk missile launcher that shot it down. Crowd-sourced analysis helped identify the movements of the launcher prior to and after launching its missile. Painstaking research found numerous social media posts that showed the Buk; each image and video was geolocated and the time of day was derived from the length of shadows. Small identifying marks on the vehicle were used to 'fingerprint' it and establish a timeline of its movements before and after the shooting. The community effort allowed Bellingcat to turn individual snippets of evidence into proof that made a crucial contribution to the international investigation. The MH-17 investigation was followed by numerous other successful group projects: positively identifying the Russian GRU operatives responsible for the poisoning of Sergei and Julia Skripal in Salisbury; countering far-right extremism in the US; cataloguing events during the civil war in Yemen; and proving the use of chemical weapons in Syria, among many others. One measure of Bellingcat's success is that it has caught the attention of authoritarian states who see Bellingcat as a threat and have accused it of representing various Western intelligence agencies.

The author also looks to the future and notes that contrary to popular myth, something posted on the Internet is not necessarily there in perpetuity, noting that "the online world seems both enduring and ephemeral" (p. 197). The book highlights a dilemma in that the pressure on social media platforms to remove violent and extremist content is at odds with the need to preserve the evidential record for future judicial and historical analysis. In the future historians are likely to spend less time in physical archives and more time analysing online content; this book offers excellent insight into how they might determine historic fact from manipulation. The value of *We Are Bellingcat* is not just in highlighting the importance of Bellingcat's findings, but also in educating us on its methods and techniques of verification.

We are Bellingcat should be read by military professionals of all specialisations, but particularly those who are regular consumers of intelligence. This fascinating and very readable book clearly makes the case for the importance of open-sources and describes a reversal in the primacy of secret intelligence, traditionally the preserve of states, towards open-source intelligence, the domain of the masses. It will also be of great interest to academics researching information warfare and to those with more general interest in recent conflict. It reinforces the need for all of us to challenge and critically analyse what we see online.

A growing body of literature is emerging expounding the societal threats of disinformation, in both the online and offline worlds, but few offer a solution to what has become one of the 21st Century's most insidious threats. *We Are Bellingcat* offers a glimmer of hope that the truth is out there for those with the diligence and commitment to find it. Those with a dystopian outlook might argue that disinformation is a problem that cannot be fixed. However, Bellingcat does not accept "cyber-miserabilism" (p. 7) and believes it can make a difference by growing communities vested with the skills to provide us with objectively verified facts.