

Review – We Are Bellingcat

Written by Robert Bunker

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ROBERT BUNKER, JUL 1 2021

We Are Bellingcat: Global Crime, Online Sleuths, and the Bold Future of News
By Eliot Higgins
Bloomsbury, 2021

The author of the new work *We Are Bellingcat*, Eliot Higgins, a college dropout, is a formerly obsessive *World of Warcraft* online gamer, and stay at home father who is seemingly among the least- likeliest of us to influence contemporary international relations, and yet this is what he has accomplished. In the 272 page book, Higgins provides us with an intertwined story about himself, his new passion which redefined his life, and the (still evolving) Bellingcat online investigative organization it has morphed into. Higgins has since become a much sought after commentator by global news organizations, been a visiting research associate at Kings College London and University of California, Berkeley, and has direct dealings with the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

The work roughly covers the 2011 to mid-2020 time period chronicling some of the organization's major success stories—such as its breakthrough investigations of the Russian chemical agent attack in Salisbury, England; the Russian downing of flight MH17 over the Ukraine; and the Assad Regime's use of chemical weapons in Syria. Bellingcat, at the time the book was completed, is characterized as “an international collective of researchers, investigators, and citizen journalists using open-source and social media investigation to probe some of the world's most pressing problems” (blurb). The staff of paid members is in the dozens, with an extensive network of unpaid volunteers with varying levels of distributed collaborative access—the staff and core contributor group utilize an “internal Slack messaging board” (p.70) for larger projects with additional collaborative outer rings and channels extending farther out into the network. This is a far cry from Higgin's Brown Mosses blogging days (pre-July 2014).

The introduction begins with the March 2018 Novichok attack on the Skripals in Salisbury, discusses the rise of social mistrust in the digital era along with the need to counter it with OSINT (open-source intelligence), and how Bellingcat represents “an intelligence agency for the people” (p.8). *We Are Bellingcat* is divided into five main chapters. The first chapter, *Revolution on a Laptop*, chronicles Higgins' early 2011 online activity as an Arab Spring watcher and how he transitioned into a ‘truth seeker’ (i.e., a digital detective) first posting at the *Guardian* live-blog site and then later at his Brown Mosses site. Higgins stumbles into online investigative techniques during this era, begins to create a distributed network of experts that he can interface with, and gains esoteric expertise related to weaponry being utilized in Syria such as barrel-bombs. The transition of Higgins' organization from its ad hoc past just as the MH17 flight was shot down by a Russian Buk missile launcher in July 2014 is explained in chapter two, *Becoming Bellingcat*. The investigation of the incident is extensively discussed, as well as how it helped to shape the future of Bellingcat.

The third chapter, *Firewall of Facts*, highlights the fight against ‘digital dystopia’ stemming from the rise of authoritarian and associated entities who have created an online counterfactual campaign against truth and how those opposed to them (most importantly, networks of empowered individuals) can determine the actual facts in order to create a protective ‘firewall’ against them. The investigation into the Novichok attack in Salisbury is the focus of chapter four, *Mice Catch Cat*, along with its direct Russian GRU (Russian military intelligence) linkages and the various forms of blowback for Bellingcat investigators that may take place (i.e., physical and digital threats and PTSD). The final chapter, *Next Steps*, explores the leveraging of social-media records via AI (artificial intelligence)

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enabled systems, AI dangers related to 'deepfake' and 'synthetic media,' utilizing new software programs (i.e., Hunchly), and the highlighting of new innovative Bellingcat initiatives and partnerships.

The essence of the work is that it chronicles the revolt of the amateurs—*the mice*; who have become empowered individuals—against the predators—*the bad cats*; authoritarian states (and groups like the Islamic State), who are the perpetrators of heinous crimes. At the same time, these empowered mice are trying to provide support to intelligence professionals and agencies associated with presumably *the good cats*—democratic states, who appear totally inept at using new types of 21st century open-source tradecraft. Within this struggle, the authoritarian states and their associated 'baddies' have created a 'Counterfactual Community' (pp.114-122) as a social media strategy in order for them to achieve impunity for their immoral physical activities. As an example, the Russian disinformation campaign is focused on the "4D Approach: Dismiss, Distort, Distract, Dismay" per Ben Nimmo's (currently Global IO Threat Intel Lead at Facebook) analysis (p.75). To counter this community and its techniques, the Bellingcat approach is based on the following mission statement:

- **Identify** issues both overlooked and discoverable online.
- **Verify** all evidence, and never indulge in speculation.
- **Amplify** what we learn, while amplifying the field as a whole (p.60).

This has developed over time as Higgins' thinking changed from being reactive to proactive in orientation—in an effort to alleviate human suffering—after his covering of the Houla massacre in Syria in May 2012 (p.27). Also, one of the nice approaches taken in the book is Higgins' openly giving credit where it is due. While he can be recognized as the mouse that actually 'belled the cat,' as far as being the mastermind behind creating and growing his organization, he acknowledges the contributions of many of his associates to the overall effort and various projects that the organization has been involved.

The style of the book is journalistic in nature which makes for a better and more enjoyable read. As such, it is targeted at more general audiences as opposed to an academic market. Higgins is cast as a Steve Jobs-like visionary, an underdog with the deck stacked against him who has the drive and work ethic of a zealot, ultimately for just causes. While not fully embracing the archetypical hero's journey mythos as expressed by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, the work exudes an air of nobility and valor—especially with physical threats now increasingly being made against Higgins and his associates. Some, however, may be immediately turned off by the book's narrative and cynically see it as a marketing ploy on the part of the author whose group is primarily funded by grants.

While Higgins has been highly successful in his innovative approach to online investigation (focused on open-source and social media utilization), OSINT (open-source intelligence)—both physical and digital—has been capitalized on since at least the 1990s by progressive entities for counter-terrorism purposes. Hence, Higgins did not 'discover the wheel' so to speak (nor does he appear to claim to) but has gone on to perfect his own OSINT/investigative model using distributed collaborative tools, an extended network composed of his staff and volunteers, and a new generation of online programs and Apps (Google Earth & 3D, SunCalc, TrueCaller, Check, et al.) creatively applied. The notes, except for in a dozen or so instances, are simply URLs (uniform resource locators, which are unactivated hyperlinks in the physical copy version) with no other citation information provided. These will not age well and will create source verification issues down the line. Given the importance of social media, imagery interpretation, and geolocation analysis, a photo gallery of some sort would have also been welcomed but for whatever reason was not included in the work. However, overall criticisms of the work are minor.

In summation, *We Are Bellingcat* provides an at times riveting 'cloak & dagger' expose into a new form of investigative criminal and humanitarian crimes reporting. The work is an easy and enjoyable read and well-priced. It can be viewed as how citizens living in democracies—and in some instances authoritarian states—can help contend with the nefarious activities being perpetrated by 21st century baddies as characterized in such earlier works as *LikeWar*, *Messing with the Enemy*, and *War in 140 Characters*. The book will be of interest to academics and general

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audiences alike who focus upon social media and its relationship to fake news and disinformation.

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