

New Technology, War, and Human Rights Reporting

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Abstract: This chapter uses the Bellingcat collective of online researchers as an example of the ways in which digital technologies are being used to investigate human rights abuses in areas of conflict. At a safe distance from contemporary battlefields, Bellingcat volunteers and paid staff as well as professional journalists and personnel from rights organizations comprise a distinctive online community which transparently crowd-sources disputed facts in areas of conflict. From its inception, the group has worked with rights organizations on live investigations by discovering, verifying and interpreting disputed facts in areas of conflict. The group's founder, Eliot Higgins, began by archiving user-generated data from Libya, Syria and Ukraine for use in future war crimes investigations. The chapter ends by briefly historicizing such human rights reporting and by linking to other actors in the field puts Bellingcat in a wider context.

Key terms: Bellingcat, crowdsourcing, Eliot Higgins, human rights reporting, Walter Lippmann, MH17, Syria, Ukraine, war reporting.

Index terms: Bellingcat, crowdsourcing, sourcing, investigation, verification, social media, journalism, human rights reporting, foreign news, reporters, objectivity, war reporting, NGOs, conflict.

Data-driven investigations¹ have transformed how information is verified and shared in areas of conflict where human rights are under threat, in order to hold bad actors to account.² However, these new technologies also increase the scope for repressive governments to monitor the legitimate activities of citizens. So while UN investigators tracking crimes in Iraq against the Yazidi minority by members of the Islamic State (IS) group have used 3D-imaging to locate mass graves and collected millions of IS members' call data records from local mobile phone service providers,³ the Chinese government has used unprecedented mass-surveillance technologies against millions of Uyghur and other ethnic Turkic activists in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, described by the rights group Human Rights Watch (HRW) in 2018 as "Orwellian."⁴ While investigative journalists have always played an important role in human rights reporting,⁵ new collaborators using novel technologies are working with them to verify information in the digital sphere, including eye-witnesses who can report violations with a smartphone app.⁶ This chapter examines the ways in which one such group, the citizen journalist collective Bellingcat, transparently verifies important disputed facts in areas of conflict and how its founder Eliot Higgins adopted freely-available online tools to crowd-source investigations used in human rights reporting. This mainly volunteer collective of online investigators is best-known for identifying in 2018 the would-be assassins of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury,⁷ but it has also tracked the use, illegal under international law, against civilians of chemical weapons⁸ and "barrel bombs" in Syria.⁹ The chapter describes a foreign news reporting digital ecosystem, consisting of international journalists, rights groups and other investigative agencies which help bring individuals accused of war crimes to account. It uses two such case studies, the first a chemical weapon attack by the Syrian government against a rebel-held suburb of Damascus in August 2013 which prompted the United States government to consider military intervention. The second is Bellingcat's investigation into the shooting-down of the Malaysian Airlines plane MH17 by a Russian military unit operating in Eastern Ukraine in July 2014 and the subsequent trial in Holland. These examples have been chosen because Bellingcat's contribution to locating and verifying authoritative evidence was subsequently

corroborated by independent agencies, including rights organizations, the police or war crimes prosecutors. In this sphere the human factor is as important as what technology is used. The chapter ends by conceptualizing Bellingcat ethnographically, as the new entrants to William Howard Russell's "luckless tribe"¹⁰ of foreign correspondents, whose contribution to human rights reporting in the twentieth-century has roots in traditions established in the liberal democracies at the close of World War Two.

Fieldwork

I have been researching Higgins's work and Bellingcat's place in foreign news reporting since 2013. Some of the work presented here is based on published fieldwork interviewing reporters and their sources which I conducted on the Syrian border in 2013¹¹ and in Ukraine in 2015.¹² I first interviewed Eliot Higgins at the University of Kent Centre for Journalism in November 2013 and subsequently led a talk with him and two other pioneers in the field, Malachy Browne from the verification website Storyful and Trushar Barot, of the BBC social media unit at the Frontline Club in London entitled "The changing face of newsgathering."¹³ In 2016, I contributed an independent assessment to a Bellingcat report, *MH17: The Open Source Investigation Two Years Later*,¹⁴ about some of the MH17 witnesses whom I had interviewed in Ukraine. Finally, in September 2016 in Rotterdam, Holland, I discussed Bellingcat's evidence-gathering techniques with two police detectives from the Dutch-led international Joint Investigation Team (JIT) gathering evidence about who was responsible for shooting down the plane.

Higgins and the Reporting of Sarin Nerve Gas attacks in Ghouta, Syria (2013)

The first case concerns Bellingcat's investigation into who was responsible for the use in the Damascus suburb of east Ghouta on civilians and opposition fighters of the nerve agent Sarin in

August 2013. This was a clear human rights violation and illegal under international law. Local rebel fighters and the Syrian military immediately blamed each other. The initial evidence that a chemical attack had occurred were 70-odd videos posted on YouTube by residents, showing mysterious rockets which had landed and exploded, apparently releasing a toxic gas. The video footage of children, gasping for breath and dying on-screen, had a huge impact when it was transmitted by television news channels and news websites around the world. The attack mattered because President Barack Obama had previously indicated that the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict would make the US intervene militarily in the conflict.¹⁵ At the time, international news organizations had pulled their staff reporters out of Syria because dozens of international journalists were being kidnapped by IS¹⁶ and many later murdered.¹⁷ In the absence of independent chemical weapons experts or correspondents on the ground the most credible evidence of who was to blame for the attack had come from Eliot Higgins, who posted his analysis in the guise of the anonymous blogger “Brown Moses” on Facebook and a blog page.¹⁸ Working from his home in suburban Leicester, Higgins had devised novel techniques to analyze eye-witness material posted on social media by local people on the battlefield. In doing so, Higgins both became an important news source and filled an important reporting gap in the news sphere, which was also important for rights organizations.

Higgins had never been to Syria and spoke no Arabic, instead appealing for help from fellow users of social media, particularly Twitter. He then published the results online for free. He had started out as an amateur commentator, who became interested in the weapons being used in the Arab Spring uprising in Libya in 2011 which were shown in material posted online on social media, and would post frequent comments underneath stories carried on news websites like that of the *Guardian*. Gradually Higgins acquired research skills, verifying the provenance of posts that others had made online. He taught himself to use free, widely available online tools such as Google maps to identify where videos were filmed, even though they may have been renamed and were pretending to be something else.

In an article which he published on the blog and was later picked up by the *Guardian*, Higgins and the security consultant Dan Kaszeta, who had previously worked for the US Army, the White House Military Office and the US Secret Service, had stated the projectiles were of a design unique to the Syrian Army. Online videos proved the rockets had been used against opposition forces since 2012.¹⁹ But most damning for the Syrian government, Bellingcat published videos, publicity material, that had previously been published by Syrian army units.²⁰ This showed them using the unique “Volcano”-type rockets which had it appeared been specially produced in Syrian arms factories. Higgins contributed his findings to a report by the rights group Human Rights Watch which was published within weeks of the attack, and which blamed the Syrian military, based on the evidence.²¹ Under the terms of reference for the subsequent United Nations report, published days later, which was prepared by specialists from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN declined saying who fired them. However, it confirmed Higgins’s findings, including the direction the rockets came from, and stated that the UN inspectors found the trajectories of the rockets led back to a Syrian army base.²²

In contemporary areas of conflict reporters are increasingly denied access to the battlefield and targeted for kidnapping or attack.²³ In such circumstances, independent researchers including journalists must find innovative ways of gathering and verifying facts which may be used in future war crimes trials. Wall and Zahed describe the war in Syria as an example of a “pop-up news ecology,”²⁴ and recent scholarship points to the sourcing opportunities offered to journalists working in highly networked digital news “ecosystems.”²⁵ As Gans wrote: “Journalists see people mainly as potential sources,”²⁶ and journalists who cannot gain access to events on the battlefield find Higgins an extremely helpful source.²⁷ When I first met Higgins in Kent in 2013, he said his work was not designed to replace that of traditional journalists and he did not consider himself to be one. “I’m more interested in the investigations, to be honest, than the journalism,” he said (author interview, November 12, 2013). Rather, his investigations complemented the work of “traditional”

reporters on the ground. Thus, Higgins emerged, empowered, from the masses “formerly known as the audience,”²⁸ appearing to fulfil the previous hopes of New York University Professor Jay Rosen who had hoped that non-journalists would teach themselves to use such tools to find nuggets of truth hiding online in plain sight. The BBC producer Stuart Hughes said: “He’s probably broken more stories than most journalists do in a career.”²⁹ Viewed in this light, Higgins was, therefore, an immensely rare example of Rosen’s putative citizen journalists who would make a real contribution to news reporting. Higgins told me: “Journalists are overworked. That’s why they like stories to be handed to them on a plate. When I show reporters how I work, they look at me as though I have just shown them how to do an amazing card trick” (author interview).

At this point funding himself mainly with money donated by the public, Higgins was building metadata into the videos and other material in order to make the data searchable. He told me he had been archiving user-generated data from Libya and Syria Ukraine which was constantly deleted by social media moderators, but which if preserved could be useful to journalists and future war crimes investigations (author interview). Higgins said he was monitoring 700 YouTube channels run in Syria by activists, citizen journalists and groups of rebel fighters, as well as government television channels and those of militia groups connected to the regime (author interview). At the time, between 100 and 300 new videos shot in Syria were appearing every day, though he said: “Only 0.1 per cent is of interest” (author interview). Instead of talking to activists, he preferred to work with material posted online that anyone can later check for themselves. This was not the case if he conducted interviews offline, and talking to eye-witnesses on the ground could pose unexpected problems he felt ill-equipped to resolve. For example, during the aftermath of the Ghouta attack, Higgins had been on a Skype call with a local activist discussing a Sarin projectile which had landed nearby. To Higgins’s horror, the man confided that he had put the expended chemical weapon in his flat for safe-keeping, and Higgins told him to at least put it on the balcony where it might be safer (author interview). He spoke of the difficulty of establishing himself as a trusted news source:

When you have no credibility, it is very important to build a reputation [. . .] The problem is, NGOs, journalists and government departments don't know how to deal with this material. When I started the blog, I didn't think of myself as a non-traditional reporter or journalist. I was doing something I was interested in doing. As time went on I was trying to get the information I was writing out there. So I was starting to accept offers to write articles. Unpaid, I should add. And that started getting the information out there. Then I started thinking about what techniques I can demonstrate to other people. So in a way I was trying to educate other people how to do it as well. I was trying to work with this vast amount of information and turn it into something useful. The one thing I came up against a lot was, people were producing this information but no one was taking any notice of it. Because they were making it too hard to be accessible for journalists. So I started to think, how can I make this easy? I assumed journalists were too busy or too lazy to do the work themselves to investigate it or fact check stuff. I was trying to create stuff that was neatly packaged with a nice little bow, with all the sources and information. I think that helped me break out of what is quite often an insular little community discussing these things. I basically did all the work I could on the subject and just gave it to people for free (Higgins, author interview.)

NGOs play a bigger role in news gathering than they previously did.³⁰ And for researchers trying to gather evidence of human rights abuses in modern war zones, closed Facebook groups, many of which are run by Human Rights Watch, have emerged as an important offline way of mediating how disputed events are discussed within this community. These secret groups are a place where researchers can exchange information in a private setting and have partly replaced the hotel bar as a safe space where reporters, aid workers and weapons specialists can have frank “off the record” conversations. Colleen Murrell has written about largest and best-known of these groups, known as “The Vulture Club,”³¹ with around 10,000 members. At the time of writing, it

continues to be run by the former Human Rights Watch Emergencies Director, Peter Bouckaert. Human Rights Watch has also set up smaller groups on Facebook where members share logistical information useful to those working in specific areas of conflict or in specialists fields, such as chemical weapons research. As part of my previous fieldwork research into the ways foreign correspondents and desk editors have about their reporting, I joined one such online group in 2013, which I will not name.³² Its 932 members were mostly journalists but included workers in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including rights organizations. The members used their real names, presumably in order to put to rest any doubts about disinformation which might otherwise be spread anonymously. Bouckaert eventually closed the group in February 2015 because information was leaking out, replacing it with another after vetting those members who wanted to rejoin. In order to get access, it is necessary to be recommended by another member. The first member I approached said he was not the best person to recommend me as he had fallen out with Bouckaert. The journalist Chris Stephen, who provided witness testimony for a war crimes trial at The Hague Tribunal and has worked with HRW researchers,³³ used the Libya-based HRW group. He said it was useful for sharing safety information but there is a conflict of interest. “It is always better when journalists themselves run such things” (author interview, July 10, 2020). Plaut writes: “NGOs are quite aware of the decreasing size of international news bureaus and are beginning to position themselves as a bridge between formal ‘mainstream news’ and their own advocacy agendas.”³⁴ Wright has noted the phenomenon of “NGOs fostering the creation of dialogic networks and cosmopolitan spaces [. . .] with the potential to enable [. . .] political change.”³⁵ By monitoring and contributing to what is being discussed on them, such platforms are a way for an NGO to project its soft power.

Evidence gathered by Higgins’s methods can be easily checked by anyone. This offers significant transparency about the chain of evidence when human rights abuses are authenticated. Ristovska identifies the key role in such cases of video shot by local people. She writes:



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“Interpreting images is becoming an essential skill within the struggles to unveil human rights offenses, to report on global crises, and to successfully present legal evidence.”³⁶ Thus groups like Bellingcat mediate what sources on the ground post on social media. Sienkiewicz has theorized that Higgins occupies a key place in an “interpreter tier”³⁷ of online investigators who aggregate evidence they investigate online for the benefit of professional journalists. Online investigations like that in Ghouta into the provenance of eye-witness videos add an important empirical element into human rights reporting, previously lacking in foreign news journalism. It can be compared to the contribution made by Geographic Information Science (GIS) in the social sciences, which helps make the empirical basis of research data visible and checkable.³⁸

The Shooting-down of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 in Ukraine (2014)

As in the previous case, what happened with the Malaysian Airlines passenger aircraft MH17 on 17 July 2014, shot down over the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine near the town of Torez, killing all 298 people on board, was again a clear violation of international law. While the lack of access granted to outside observers to events on the ground in Syria the previous year was extreme, in Ukraine, where earlier that year Russian intelligence services had covertly fomented a war, the problem for foreign reporters and others trying to conduct independent investigations was that people in the occupied territories could not speak freely because they feared for their safety. During the summer of 2014 Higgins had crowd-funded a website called Bellingcat in order to form a collective of volunteers who could train others in the online verification techniques he had popularised. The following year I travelled to Ukraine to conduct interviews with some of Bellingcat’s sources there, who had posted newsworthy material on social media. Few of those who contributed interviews to my 2015 fieldwork had previously been interviewed face-to-face. The international police detectives investigating MH17 offered witness protection to those whose evidence they wanted to present to the court.³⁹ The Russian-backed separatist militias at the crash

site prevented outsiders from visiting the site in the aftermath of the crash. A researcher working on my behalf also interviewed Human Rights Watch personnel in the field to contextualize information from the interviewees.

At a press conference held in Holland on September 28, 2016, the JIT team of international police investigators announced apparently irrefutable evidence that MH-17 had been shot down by a 9M38-series missile, fired from a BUK Telar launch vehicle stationed in a field near the village of Pyervomaitskiy.⁴⁰ At the time the area was controlled by pro-Russian fighters. The BUK is an advanced weapons system which is used by both the Ukrainian and Russian military but the informal separatist militias operating in eastern Ukraine, which are backed by Russia, possess neither the skills nor the hardware. At the press conference, the JIT accused a Russian army unit of firing the missile, which they stated had been transported from the Russian Federation into eastern Ukraine, fired one missile on the day the plane was hit, and had then crossed the border back into Russian territory. The Russian authorities had initially said that a Ukrainian Buk had shot down the plane and later came up with numerous other explanations supposedly proving they were not involved,⁴¹ all subsequently discounted by the JIT. However, local people in the occupied territories continually filmed and photographed unusual-looking military equipment, including the Buk launcher, posting the results online. Matveeva wrote: “The war was fought in the conditions when the population of Donbas was heavily connected to the internet and knew how to use it. Anybody could become a newsmaker, a producer, a journalist or a photographer if they had a story that the public wanted to hear.”⁴²

Two of my key interviewees from my fieldwork were important sources active on Twitter at the time MH17 was shot down and whose posts, published on social media are part of the evidence later verified by the JIT. Snizhne was the town by the launch site. “@HuSnizhne” and “@Wowihay” both now live in the capital, Kiev, but had anonymized their Twitter profiles using information referencing locations near the launch site. As the police investigators later showed, dozens of people were in a position to share similar eye-witness testimony. @HuSnizhne said:

“Some saw the BUK SA-11 moving, others the rocket being fired—this is all in open view. The village is here, and right there is the field the rocket was shot from” (author interview, 11 September 2015). @Wowihay and @HuSnizhne said they were in constant touch with friends and family there who were too scared to reveal themselves. @Wowihay had received an SMS from a friend who was on a bus in the town of Torez on the day the plane was shot down. His acquaintance saw the Buk drive by and @Wowihay retweeted: “An anti-aircraft missile system passed by us, in the city centre. 4 rockets. #Torez, in the direction of #Shnizhne. They are saying it’s a Buk.”⁴³ Not all outsiders investigating events on the ground appreciate how difficult it is for local people on the battlefield that is controlled by armed men. @Wowihay met a television crew from Germany led by an enthusiastic young correspondent hoping to find the Buk launch site.

Their understanding of the situation was, let’s say, minimal. They thought they would come there with no questions asked, film what they need, talk to everyone, make their report and leave unperturbed. Their heads were in the clouds. They were counting on, once they come there, [that] people will just start telling them everything. They just did not understand that if today someone tells something—then tomorrow he will be found dead (@Wowihay, author interview).

Sources usually only tweet once or twice from the battlefield because people inevitably assume they are working for one or the other side, and intimidate them. @Wowihay had had his home set on fire by separatists who came looking for him after he posted two photographs of the BUK missile smoke plume that had been taken by a friend, from his balcony in a block of flats. Realizing the photograph contained all the camera metadata and that a simple online search would reveal its owner, @Wowihay hurriedly deleted it and substituted a screenshot, thus concealing the metadata. A furious argument broke out online, with other Twitter users him of falsifying information. One photograph has cables in it, but not the other. Also the sky appears to be a

different color and in the second photograph it seems there are clouds that were not there before. Bellingcat said it would not publish metadata for the camera because it identified the photographer and publication would put him at risk. This failed to convince separatist supporters online, and there were consequences in the real world. A Dutch Twitter user, Max van der Werff, was so convinced the photographs were fakes he flew all the way from Malaysia to get into the block of flats where the photographs were taken but in doing so he accidentally confirmed their authenticity. He photographed the exact place the photo was taken from, showing how all the elements added up, including the overhanging telephone wire that the camera had auto-focused on, and other details. It became apparent that the camera's automatic settings had changed the color balance of the clouds and sky. In the end, @Wowihay made the photographs' metadata available to Bellingcat, who vouched for their authenticity. He then helped another Twitter user, @Ukraineatwar, to geolocate the launch site.⁴⁴ Two international reporters, the *Daily Telegraph* Roland Oliphant⁴⁵ and Christopher Miller from the news website Mashable,⁴⁶ named the same location where a large area of field was blackened, apparently as a result of the back-blast of the launch. The picture @Wowihay had posted of the plume was eventually authenticated by the JIT at the September 2016 press conference. At it, the police presented a previously unknown image of the same smoke trail, found on social media, which had been taken by another source.⁴⁷

Connections researchers made to people in the area supplied local knowledge. "It's very hard to find anything without a hand from locals," said @ReggaeMortis,⁴⁸ a native Russian-speaker Bellingcat researcher who is based in Kiev (author interview, 11 September 2015). Only a local was in a position to explain to him that "Cheryoma" is neighborhood slang term for the Cheryomyski area near the Buk missile launch site. All the interviewees said it was dangerous to live-tweet sensitive information directly from the battlefield. @Wowihay and his friend were targeted by the separatists after being named online. @Wowihay told me: "My parents' house has already been searched twice. They (pro-Russian militia men) were looking for me [laughing]. Then my house

was set on fire” (author interview, 12 September 2015). By contrast, @HuSnizhne had moved to Kiev before the war, but her parents still live next to the launch site. They are not active on Twitter and she live-tweeted news of the crash after a series of phone calls home. She told me she was her parents’ “interpreter” (@HuSnizhne, author interview). People on the ground were close enough to hear members of the Buk crew talk to each other: “Everybody with whom I was communicating during that time knew exactly where that BUK was, and that it was Russian soldiers [who comprised its crew]. When we hear how people speak Russian, we [can distinguish] an accent from the Donbas, or Russian from different regions” (@HuSnizhne, author interview).

It was notable that none of the Bellingcat sources I examined whose Twitter handles featured actual locations in the battlefield were actually located there. So the owner of the Twitter handle “Luhansk Today” does come from Lugansk in the Donbas but now lives in Poltava as an internally displaced person. “@Ukraineatwar,” meanwhile, is an amateur investigator located in the Netherlands. “It was a trend on social media, especially on Twitter, to name your account after the city where you live,” says @HuSnizhne (author interview). Snizhne is the name of the settlement beside the missile launch site, where she is from and where her parents still live. @Wowihay’s Twitter profile refers to the nearby town of Torez, where he lived before having been made a refugee by the war. It is no surprise that people who post material online in social media may not be who they claim to be. In the “theatre of war,”⁴⁹ the guises that sources on social media assume often have a performative element, recalling the American sociologist Erving Goffman’s front-stage/back-stage distinction.⁵⁰ Goffman identified the obvious aspect of actors in theatrical performances which they present to the audience—but also the hidden backstage area, where players can dispense with the identities they present publicly, and be themselves.

When I travelled to Rotterdam, Holland, in September 2016 at the request of the JIT detectives to discuss aspects of my research which they had noticed in an online recording of an academic conference talk, the police confirmed that Bellingcat had provided evidence from social

media to them which they were using in the case. The JIT also published⁵¹ a number of intercepted telephone conversations between the suspects, Bellingcat also having done their own independent verification of some of their identities. A Russian-speaking Bellingcat collaborator named Aric Toler, who had previously resigned from his corporate intelligence job at an American bank, began working full time for Bellingcat, leading their investigation into the shooting-down of MH17.⁵² Toler found and verified most of the social media profiles of the soldiers who had transported and fired the Buk and sent all that information to the JIT (Aric Toler, personal communication July 18, 2016). Bellingcat later stated that while journalists who work with them normally publish their findings immediately, the police detectives held back other evidence which they possessed until they were ready to reveal it in court.⁵³ In June 2019, the chief Dutch Prosecutor Fred Westerbeke charged three Russian nationals and one Ukrainian in connection with MH17. Their trial opened at the District Court in the Hague in Holland in March 2020. This court has previously heard cases with regard to offences that are punishable in the International Crimes Act, such as genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and torture.⁵⁴

Bellingcat's Place in Human Rights Reporting

What is evident from the literature on the historical development of human rights reporting are the deep connections to a concern of news reporters in the liberal democracies with human rights and humanitarian violations since World War Two. This remains a feature of Anglo-American foreign journalism to this day, according to the former BBC News editor and now Cardiff University Professor Richard Sambrook, who identifies the work of leading war reporters of the 1930s and 1940s such as the CBS journalist Ed Murrow, Martha Gellhorn and Richard Dimbleby, of the BBC. Taking as an example Dimbleby's reporting at the Nazi concentration at Belsen, he writes that it "offered a narrative of conscience, a focus on victims and the humanitarian consequences of big events which still informs much international reporting today."⁵⁵ World War

Two was also the conflict when the victors established the concept of universal human rights, abuses of which could be documented and participants held to account.⁵⁶ The US and its allies tried perpetrators of abuses at Nuremburg, out of which has developed international bodies such as the International Criminal Court. There is now also a huge number of international non-governmental human rights organizations including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. A great deal of the research into digital technologies falls into the category of being either utopian or dystopian. Many early adopters hailed the potential of social media networks to transform the sourcing and verification of news. Bell wrote: “Twitter is already a far more effective tool for reporting, discovering, dissemination and collaboration than anything the BBC will ever produce.”⁵⁷ However, the use of social media by Russian intelligence to promote false narratives during the invasion of eastern Ukraine suggests its effectiveness in promoting propaganda. McNair notes that digital networks are the principal means by which previously marginalized sources now promote fake news, deception and disinformation.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, Harrison writes: “The availability of greater sources of news does not guarantee an engaged or enlightened citizenry (any more than anything else does), and easier claims to this effect about the internet and the digital citizen now seem exaggerated.”⁵⁹ Writing about contemporary war reporting, Williams comments: “We are living in an age when the ordinary person can gather and transmit foreign news.”⁶⁰ However, it was Walter Lippmann who first pointed out that “anybody can be a journalist—and usually is.”⁶¹ Some 100 years after he advanced the idea that the sole purpose of journalism is a professional commitment to transparently verify facts, which Lippmann termed objectivity,⁶² Ahmad writes that the place of journalists and their collaborators like Bellingcat in the human rights reporting ecosystem could not be clearer. For their work essentially updates Lippmann’s original idea of journalistic objectivity for a digital age:

By coming closer than ever to an approximation of the scientific, “objective” method of reporting originally envisaged by Walter Lippmann, the work of such open source

investigators has reinvigorated investigative journalism in a “post truth” world. This is the closest that journalism has come to a scientific method: The transparency allows the process to be replicated, the underlying data to be examined, and the conclusions to be tested by others. This is worlds apart from the journalism of assertion that demands trust in expert authority.⁶³

This changes how we understand what journalistic objectivity is in the modern world, and hence the empirical basis of what such investigations contribute to human rights reporting. Richard Sambrook believes that the verification of facts will be a core skill of journalists of the future. An unnamed Reuters editor told him: “We used to need hunter-gatherers; in future we’ll need farmers.”⁶⁴ It has long been argued that objectivity is essentially bogus. The BBC reporter Martin Bell, in advocating “the journalism of attachment,” wrote:

I am no longer sure about the notion of objectivity, which seems to me now to be something of an illusion and a shibboleth. When I report from the war zones, or anywhere else, I do so with all the fairness and impartiality I can muster, and a scrupulous attention to the facts, but using my eyes and ears and mind and accumulated experience, which are surely the very essence of the subjective.⁶⁵

This research highlights Bellingcat’s ambiguous place within human rights reporting. Paradoxically, as contemporary reporters have become estranged from and usurped by their sources in areas of conflict, journalists’ collaborations with online investigators have reinvigorated their claim to be the custodians of fact-based reporting. Working within the field of anthropology, the ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep coined the term “liminality”—from the word *limen*, meaning threshold—in his book *Rites of Passage*,⁶⁶ denoting the qualities attached to periods of transition in tribal society. Victor Turner called such social transitions “a process, a becoming [. . .]

into a new achieved status” within the tribe.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, Meyers and Davidson note: “Journalism is becoming increasingly liminal, [. . .] understood and practiced differently by journalists and others ‘committing acts of journalism.’”⁶⁸ This is a helpful way of understanding Bellingcat’s role within foreign news. The qualifications required for membership of the modern tribe of war reporters are “porous and uneven,” according to Markham.⁶⁹ From this point of view, Bellingcat are the tribe’s new members. They function as sources for journalists, yet have agency as news producers in their own right. At the same time, these techniques have become part of mainstream journalism. Throughout the history of war reporting, reporters who were not actually present at the events they describe have relied heavily on eye-witnesses who were. Williams points out: “Eyewitness accounts are rarely produced by reporters. They rely on what people who purport to have been there tell them.”⁷⁰ The former BBC war reporter Robert Fox says the main component of battlefield reports is the “anecdotal report at one remove.”⁷¹ By contrast, in the world of open source verification, the crowd’s wisdom evaluates the truthfulness of evidence in real time. When asked about their first contact with Bellingcat, sources unanimously said that Bellingcat first retweeted them, and got in contact only later. As one of the local aggregators put it. “This is the problem with open source: first we post, then we check” (@Wowihay, author interview). News organizations have long struggled with whether it’s important to be first with the news, or hold off publication to verify it properly.⁷² Bellingcat acknowledge their sources are not always trustworthy, but it is important that they are diverse: “If they tweet something in tandem it is more likely to be true, rather than an organized disinformation campaign [like that conducted by the Russians]” (Aric Toler, personal communication June 24, 2016).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the contribution to human rights reporting of the investigative verification techniques used by the Bellingcat group as well as the human connections between the

sources on the ground used in journalism and human rights researchers. Their alumni and other associates are also active in the field. Bellingcat has helped journalists at the BBC World television documentary strand Africa Eye identify seven Cameroonian soldiers, later arrested, who were filmed killing two women and two young children in a video circulating online.⁷³ The former Bellingcat researcher, Christiaan Triebert, is a member of a *New York Times* Visual Investigations team which contributed stories to a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation into Russia's secret bombings of hospitals⁷⁴ and civilians⁷⁵ in Syria in 2020 and so is Malachy Browne, who appeared at the Frontline Club talk already mentioned.⁷⁶ Other organizations using these techniques include the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFR Lab), First Draft News and Amnesty International, which has teamed up with Forensic Architecture, a research agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London⁷⁷ and the Human Rights Investigations Lab at the UC Berkeley School of Law.⁷⁸ Nick Waters, another Bellingcat collaborator, has archived online content documenting rights violations in Yemen and was doing the same with police violence at the George Floyd Black Lives protests in the US in 2020, which he hoped would be used in court.⁷⁹ But as Higgins wrote to me in 2019: "The best thing is, I feel like it's just beginning."⁸⁰

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NOTES

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¹¹ Pendry, “Kidnapping,” “Freelancer demand,” “Reporter Power.”

¹² Pendry, “Partiality.”

¹³ Frontline Club, “Changing Face.”

¹⁴ Bellingcat, “Two Years Later.”

¹⁵ Landler, “Obama Threatens.”

¹⁶ Pendry, “Fear of Kidnapping.”

¹⁷ Harkin, *Hunting Season*.

¹⁸ See Brown Moses blog and archive: <https://brown-moses.blogspot.com/>. The page has links to the Facebook and other social media pages where Higgins first began publishing his open source investigations.

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³⁴ Plaut, “Fact Based Storytelling,” 850.

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- ³⁵ Wright, “NGOs as News Organizations,” 18.
- ³⁶ Ristovska, 355, 2016.
- ³⁷ Sienkiewicz, “Start,” 696.
- ³⁸ Chainey, *GIS*. See also: Burdick et al., *Digital Humanities*, 4.
- ³⁹ JIT, “MH17 Witness appeal.”
- ⁴⁰ See: JIT, “Presentation of first results of the MH17 criminal investigation.”
- ⁴¹ Bellingcat’s podcast gives an accessible overview of its investigation, available at: <https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/podcasts/2019/07/17/mh17-episode-guide-1/>. Step-by-step posts showing individual elements are on the Bellingcat site: <https://www.bellingcat.com/>.
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- ⁴³ See: <https://twitter.com/WowihaY/status/489698009148837888>.
- ⁴⁴ See: <http://ukraineatwar.blogspot.com/2014/07/launch-location-detected-of-missile.html>.
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- ⁴⁸ He now calls himself “@Mortis_Banned.”
- ⁴⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*.
- ⁵⁰ Goffman, *Presentation of Self*.
- ⁵¹ See the web page: www.jitmh17.com.
- ⁵² Toler describes other aspects of how he coordinated investigations in Ukraine in his book chapter, “Patriotic Digital Forensics.”
- ⁵³ The previously unpublished evidence presented to the court in Holland is discussed in a Bellingcat post of April 20, 2020: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/04/20/the-mh17-trial-part-1-new-materials-from-the-four-defendants/>. Also in their podcast dated June 5, 2020: <https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/podcasts/2020/06/05/bellingchat-episode-1-mh17-past-present-and-future/>.
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- ⁵⁵ Sambrook, *Are Foreign Correspondents Redundant?*, 6.
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- ⁶⁷ Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 94.
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- ⁶⁹ Markham, “Uses and Functions,” 130.
- ⁷⁰ Williams, “War Correspondents as Sources,” 349.
- ⁷¹ Fox, “History and War Reporting,” 6.
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- ⁷⁴ See: <https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/middleeast/100000005697485/russia-bombed-syrian-hospitals.html>.

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⁷⁷ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysgnadic3Yo>.

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⁸⁰ See his Twitter feed, April 4, 2019.

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