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Note on the Contributor
Richard Pendry is a lecturer at the University of Kent Centre for Journalism. He researches how journalists and sources use each other in areas of conflict, and has written about contemporary reporting practices in Iraq and Syria. Richard is a former member of Frontline News Television, a news agency which specialised in reporting conflict.

Abstract
The article examines the activities of reporters and news sources in the Ukrainian conflict. It adapts a typology that was developed by David Deacon to examine the motivations of reporters in the Spanish civil war. The Bellingcat group of citizen journalists are examples of 'parajournalists', news sources identified by Michael Schudson that have begun to act more like reporters. Bellingcat verified material on social media that tracked the course of the covert Russian invasion in 2014, including sightings of the Buk missile launcher which destroyed Malaysian airliner MH17. The author interviewed people from social media in Ukraine to investigate how their political and personal affiliations affect their credibility for the international news organisations who use them as sources.

Partiality, Patriotism and Propaganda: Aggregating local news sources in Ukraine

Richard Pendry, University of Kent

Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula in March 2014 after supporting a separatist uprising by local people who identified as Russian rather than Ukrainian. Such people are a majority in much of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea (Plokhy, 2015: 337-354). The annexation was quickly followed by a positive vote in a hasty referendum organised by the separatists — but recognised by almost no outside actors — on whether to join Russia. War spread quickly across eastern Ukraine, as 'spontaneous' uprisings followed in the Donbas region (Sakwa, 2015: 148-237). Against the evidence, the Russian government denied its troops were supporting separatists to conduct a covert invasion. The Russian authorities mounted an online propaganda war using fake news published domestically (Khaldarova and Pantti, 2016) and also via its international TV channel RT, formerly Russia Today, to spread the message that Russian troops were not involved. Some of the most compelling evidence that the Russian government was indeed sending troops to Ukraine came from material from social media collected by the citizen journalist website *Bellingcat*, run by Eliot Higgins (Sienkiewicz, 2015: 9-11). This amateur collective verified and published material from

social media that tracked the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine, including sightings of the Russian Buk-class missile launcher that destroyed Malaysian airliner MH17 in July 2014, killing all 298 people on board. Many international news organisations used *Bellingcat* as a source (Gordon, 2015; Luhn, 2016; Sharkov, 2016; BBC, 2016). Others conducted joint investigations with it (Borger and Higgins, 2015; Ostrovsky, 2015). In the film *Selfie Soldiers* (Ostrovsky, 2015), *Vice News* reporter Simon Ostrovsky used selfies taken by a Russian soldier named Bato Dombayev during the journey from his base in Siberia to Ukraine. *Bellingcat* geolocated the images, so that Ostrovsky could find the same spot and stand in the place of the soldier, in a neat conjunction of traditional journalistic techniques and online verification. The Russian authorities initially said that a Ukrainian Buk had shot down the plane and for months denied that they were not sending troops across the border. Russian president Putin eventually admitted in December 2015: "We never said there were not people there who carried out certain tasks, including in the military sphere" (Walker, 2015). This was understood to be an acknowledgement that the 'little green men' (mysterious soldiers without insignia) who took over Crimea were, indeed, Russian troops, and that others had been fighting in Donbas (Sakwa, 2015: op.cit.).[1]

Bellingcat uses online tools that are freely available, such as Google Maps, Facebook and Facebook's Russian equivalent, called v Kontakte (VK), to verify this information. Sienkiewicz sees *Bellingcat* as the leading example of an 'interpreter tier' of individuals who are neither professional journalists nor producers of user-generated content (UGC), who analyse and interpret the flood of such material from contemporary conflicts (Sienkiewicz, 2014: 696-698), which "vastly broadens" the opportunities for both news media and the news audience to hold the powerful to account (Matheson and Allan, 2009: 102). Open source, a term borrowed from the computer world (Lewis and Usher, 2013: 607), describes the process where readers contribute to the development of a story. *Bellingcat* describes itself as a collective of investigative citizen journalists (Bellingcat, n.d.). This study draws on interviews with *Bellingcat* investigators, their sources and other actors in order to clarify the sourcing strategies used by both *Bellingcat*

investigators and the *Bellingcat* sources themselves, in light of the latter's declared and undeclared allegiances to one or other side in the conflict.

Theory

Throughout much of the history of war reporting, reporters who were not actually present at news events have relied heavily on eyewitnesses who were (Williams, 2012: 343). This is no longer the case. Now, numerous 'accidental' sources post eyewitness material on social media, which is then remotely verified by reporters and others not at the scene (Allan, 2013: 1-25). *Bellingcat* is an example of what Schudson (2003: 1) calls "the vast world of parajournalists" — powerful [2]sources who have learned to act like reporters. Parajournalists are so ubiquitous in contemporary conflict reporting that, when Sambrook (2010) reviewed the greatly increased scope of their activities, it made him wonder whether they had made foreign correspondents redundant. The main reason professional journalists now have access to a larger number of diverse sources than ever before is the emergence of digital technologies. Parajournalists have exploited digital networks and interpret, share and publicise material, in novel ways, that news organisations then pick up and use in their news output (Sienkiewicz, 2014: 695-698). However, as far as professional journalists are concerned, parajournalists and sources alike are all sources, whatever they call themselves and whatever types of relationship they have with reporters.

But the big question regarding such parajournalists is how seriously one can take their output -— are they reliable as eyewitnesses or are they essentially propagandists? Plainly, war reporters have always used sources that are self-interested. This study examines the growing importance of parajournalists in light of their increased agency, compared to that displayed by sources active in the period before the appearance of digital technologies. Traditional sources do not aspire to undertake anything that resembles newsgathering. They simply respond to a journalist's questions and supply information. Parajournalists, on the other hand, play an active part in news production and display a variety of sourcing strategies, just like professional journalists. The way they work with sources in areas of conflict comes into focus when examined in the light of their

partiality in relation to the protagonists in that conflict. The dilemma for war reporters whose country is a protagonist in a conflict is similar (Evans, 2004: 38). But it is much harder for sources and parajournalists to report objectively on their own conflict.[3]

In his studies of international reporters in the Spanish civil war of 1936-1939, David Deacon (2008a, 2008b) categorised the reporters according to how distant they were from their sources' political and military struggle, or whether they fulfilled their role as objective journalists. Deacon called the reporters' sympathy for —or involvement with — their sources their "elective affinity" (Deacon, 2008a: 396). In this typology, reporters' elective affinities could be propagandist, partisan, sympathetic or agnostic. Deacon distinguished the international reporters in Spain according to how they approached their work, on a continuum between absolute propaganda versus absolute professionalism:

> Propagandists: These correspondents who were members or agents of a combatant force.
>
> [...]
>
> Partisans: those journalists who were passionately committed to one side, but had an associative rather than formal relationship with a cause or a party.
>
> [...]
>
> Sympathisers: those journalists who identified with particular protagonists, but whose ardour was more measured and conditional than the partisans.
>
> [...]
>
> Agnostics: The final category of foreign journalists in Spain, ''agnostics'', were those correspondents who did not connect to any significant extent with the politics of the conflict but focused instead on its intrinsic value as a news story. (Deacon 2008a: 400-403)

Neither parajournalists nor sources adhere to journalistic codes of ethics but, just like reporters, they can be truthful, dishonest or manipulative, depending in part on whether they have an agenda. As we shall see, when Deacon's categories are applied to *Bellingcat* and their sources the results shed

light on the changing relationship between sources and professional reporters — which is the "deep, dark secret" of journalism (Schudson, 2003: 134).

Deacon (2008a: 398) modified the elective affinities of the reporters he studied by showing how a range of other practical factors affected their professional practice. These included the shifting political allegiances of their editors and proprietors, changes in the readers' understanding of the war's political significance, and the diverse news management strategies by Republican and Nationalist forces. He called these external constraints on the reporters' work their "experiential affinities" (Deacon, 2008a: 398). *Bellingcat* and their sources also have external factors — experiential affinities — that change their behaviour. As we shall see, the main question for the sources is to decide which is more important, fighting the information war or providing accurate information to their social networks.

Methodology

Sixteen different *Bellingcat* sources from social media were approached and, where possible, interviewed face to face in Kiev. Lengthy interviews produced qualitative research that was rich in data. This is a research strategy by case study, defined by Yin (2003: 14) as an empirical enquiry that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when [...] the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident". As far as possible, the data from these interviews was also triangulated by talking to other actors, including *Bellingcat* investigators, reporters and news organisations that published the stories, and other sources on the ground, such as conflict reporters and NGOs. The main intelligence agencies in Ukraine also provided written responses or interviews to questions about the way they work with informants on social media. In all, 35 interviews were conducted by phone, email, on social media and in person. The interviews were time coded, translated and transcribed. One shortcoming of the data is that interviewees come only from the Ukrainian side in the conflict — though the *Bellingcat* investigations use material from all protagonists. Another is [4]that interviewees who see their role as protagonists in an information war have every incentive to aggrandise their true role. In this field,

much information is hard to check. That is why this study focuses primarily on *Bellingcat* stories that crossed over to mainstream media outlets. Many of these draw on information that has been verified by the international police investigation report in September 2016 (JIT, 2016).

The study used the most rigorous set of editorial guidelines available to ensure interviewee anonymity and the integrity of the data, drawing on the ethical codes used by the BBC Editorial Guidelines (n.d.)[5] and the *New York Times* (Siegal and Connolly, 1999: [6]22, 32). Both lay out rules that help writers "explain to the news audience what kind of understanding was actually reached by reporter and source and should shed light on the reasons" (Siegal and Connolly, i[7]bid.).. The identity of all interviewees the researchers [8]met in person was checked against the contributors' passports. (Two representatives of the hashtag #Ukraineatwar refused to show these on meeting, but one confirmed his identity in a later email).

Findings

Sources can be classified into the following categories, whose membership overlaps: (1) Civilians with friends and family who are trapped inside the occupied areas, who provide practical information to keep their friends and loved ones safe; (2) Patriotic individuals who have set up online propaganda ventures on their own initiative to expose what they see as Russian wrongdoing; (3) Individuals who are hoping to promote themselves as patriots while advancing their own political and financial advantage or to raise funds; and (4) Individuals who want to help the military and security agencies target Russian and separatist forces.

It is no surprise that people may not be exactly what they seem to be online. In the theatre of war (Clausewitz, 1949: 9), the guises that online sources assume often have a markedly performative element (Goffman, 1971). It was notable that none of the *Bellingcat* sources whose Twitter handles featured actual locations in the battlefield were, in fact, located there. So, the owner of the Twitter handle 'Luhansk Today' does come from Lugansk in the Donbas, but now lives in Poltava as a refugee. 'Ukraine at War' is an amateur investigator located in the Netherlands. Two Twitter sources, 'HuSnizhne' and 'Wowihay' gave themselves online names that refer to locations near the site of the MH17 crash, though both are in Kyiv. "It was a trend on social media, especially

on Twitter, to name your account after the city where you live", says HuSnizhne (2015). Wowihay's Twitter profile refers to the nearby town of Torez. In the absence of private conversations online or private meetings in person, it is difficult for outsiders to evaluate where such people are located. In their interviews, Wowihay and HuSnizhne said they are in constant touch with friends and family who are too scared to publish material online themselves.

Sources like this may be termed 'local aggregators': they pull together information from a variety of local sources. People they trust may simply look out of their kitchen window and make a phone call when they observe the movements of the separatists. Others with a small amount of technical knowledge may monitor open conversations on Zello or Viber, communications apps that are popular in Ukraine. The intelligence services are known to record conversations that take place in these open social networks, and so do local people. The joint police report into MH17 authenticated dozens of locally produced pictures, video or text descriptions of the Buk missile, as well as audio. International reporters do not always appreciate how difficult it is for local people on the battlefield that is controlled by armed men. Wowihay met a television crew from Germany that was led by an enthusiastic young correspondent who hoped 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. What they were counting on, once they arrived, [was that] people will just start telling them everything. They did not understand that if today someone says something [to journalists], tomorrow he will be found dead" (Wowihay, 2015).

Of course, local news aggregators are understandably not neutral when it comes to reporting the conflict. This does not necessarily imply that their posts are biased, misleading or untruthful. It just means it helps to understand what motivates the sources in order to be able to evaluate their credibility. Sources who have moved away from the battlefield re-post photos, videos and other news from friends and family who are still there. In effect, they are like professional reporters in

areas of conflict, who, because of risk, also sub-contract newsgathering out to their sources (Pendry, 2012: 15).

Judging by the statements made by Ukrainian military intelligence (see below), the sources are right to be concerned. What the face-to-face interviews suggested was a distinction between a group of social media users whose main declared aim was to help the Ukrainian side win the information war — and their humbler counterparts, who are more like eye witnesses. All the interviewees in this study wanted the Ukrainian side to win and the separatists to relinquish control of the occupied territories.

Propagandists

According to Deacon, *propagandist* reporters in Spain were those who worked directly or indirectly for one of the protagonists. For example, Claud Cockburn and Arthur Koestler were both agents for the Comintern (Deacon, 2008a: 401). Cockburn told fellow reporter Virginia Cowles in Spain: "I am not interested in watching revolutions; my job is making them'' (Cowles, 1941: 32). In Ukraine, there are plenty of sources that also want to do their bit to win the war. Such people become active on social media for a variety of reasons. On the Ukrainian side, propaganda ventures are ad hoc, provisional and utterly unlike the well organised, top-down propaganda coming from Russia. Some interviewees think of themselves as information warriors. They proudly announce that their role is to pass on information both to the public and the Ukrainian military. Roman Burko runs one such site, Informnapalm. Burko says that, when the fighting was at its height in 2014, he passed on the location of a Russian and separatist unit to the military that was running the ATO (Area of Terrorist Operation, the Ukrainian government term for the occupied territories). "Our priority was to pass the exact coordinates of the enemy in order for army to react to that by capturing or bombarding them. Because I want this war to end, not simply to write about it" (Burko, 2015). He supplied several examples of such cooperation, all of which were hard to check and as outlined below, not part of this study. *Bellingcat* investigator Aric Toler has retweeted information

from Burko, but says his strongly pro-Ukrainian stance calls his reliability into question (personal communication, 25 September 2015).

Other sources that were interviewed work directly for the military. One of the volunteer military personnel who were such a feature of the conflict on the Ukrainian side[9] is 'Aeororazvedka', who operates reconnaissance drones for the military on the battlefield. *Bellingcat* republished one of their posts on a micro-site detailing apparent violations of the ceasefire agreement. The post showed what appeared to be a separatist armoured vehicle being blown up by a missile. In fact, the post was supposed to raise funds by demonstrating the unit's military effectiveness (Aerorazvedka, 2015).

Ukrainian intelligence agencies, including the National Guard, the ATO, and the main state intelligence agency (SBU), supplied statements or agreed to on-the-record interviews with the researchers about their use of local people to gather intelligence in separatist-controlled areas. From what they said, it is clear that news sources are right to be concerned for their security. A spokesman for the Ukrainian General Staff, Vladyslav Seleznyov, said that 'opinion leaders' and bloggers were able, with the help of volunteers, to film events, gather information in plain sight and pass on data to the security services:

> "People who provided us with information acted undercover. They did not publicise their activities. As private citizens they were able to openly document [...] events, remember them, make photos and videos — as opposed to the representatives of the intelligence agencies, who were also working in occupied territories. It is understandable that [the latter] had to follow protocols for their personal security and so they couldn't work openly. Local residents [on the other hand] did have the chance to do this" (Selyeznyov, 2016).

It appears that the ATO intelligence officials are irritated by well-intentioned patriots on social networks, who provide incorrect and inaccurate information (Myronovych, 2016). Activist Semyon Kabakaev coordinated a popular hashtag on Twitter, #Stopterror, that was supposed to inform the Ukrainian military with live information on the movements of separatist units, giving the latter

crowd-sourced military intelligence provided by local people. Kabakayev was reluctant to explain how this works, but many of the *Bellingcat* sources that were interviewed used this hashtag when retweeting information from informants on the ground. One can speculate that people using social media could easily endanger Ukrainian forces when they publish information relating to ongoing operations.

Partisans

Other sources that are also politically partial, yet less focused on contributing to the information war, can be characterised as partisan. News sources in a war zone are in a complicated situation. They are trying to survive, to keep their friends and family safe — and some also want to play their part in winning the war. Most of the interviewees said they would publish fake news on social media if they thought it helped the war effort. Some of the propagandist sources claimed to have done so. All the interviewees were extremely patriotic. For its part, *Bellingcat* attempted to distinguish the ideological sympathies of the various actors that posted information on the day of the MH17 crash (Toler, 2016), including intercepted audio of separatists, which was released by the SBU, and a plethora of comments from local people, both those who supported the separatists and others who supported the Ukrainian government side. HuSnizhne had moved to Kyiv before the war, but her parents still live there and they are not active on Twitter. She live-tweeted news of the crash after a series of phone calls home. "I was like an interpreter" for her parents, she says (HuSnizhne, 2015). People in her wider social network locally were close enough to hear 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 hear their accent and [can distinguish] one from the Donbas, or the [style of] Russian [spoken in] different regions" (HuSnizhne, 2015).

As the police investigators later showed, dozens of people like HuSnizhne were in a position to share similar eye witness testimony: "Those who saw the BUK SA-11 moving, those who saw the

rocket being fired — this was all in open view. Here is the village, there is the field where the rocket was shot from" (HuSnizhne, 2015).

Some contributors to the study stated that the security services try to control what is tweeted from the battlefield. One interviewee, who wanted to remain anonymous because they feared being targeted by separatists if their identity became known claimed to have been approached by a man on Skype, who showed a medal he had received from the SBU, the Ukrainian intelligence agency, to reinforce his request that the interviewee not live-tweet the movements of a Russian convoy. The interviewee was told that once alerted, the column might change direction and be harder to track[10]. It is outside the scope of this research to definitively evaluate interviewees' claims that they had helped the Ukrainian military to target Russian and separatist units.

Sources usually only tweet once or twice from the battlefield because others inevitably assume they are working for either side's military and intimidate them. All interviewees agreed it is dangerous to live-tweet sensitive information directly from the battlefield. Wowihay, for instance, had had his home set on fire by separatists looking for him after he posted photographs of the BUK missile smoke plume that had been taken by a close friend. Two police detectives from the JIT later said (in a face-to-face interview in Antwerp, Holland, 19 September 2016) that they believed the pictures showed what Wowihay said they did. Realising the photograph contained all the metadata of his friend's camera, and that a simple online search would reveal its owner, Wowihay hurriedly deleted it and substituted it with a screenshot (so as to conceal the metadata). A furious argument broke out online, and he was accused of falsifying information. In the end, Wowihay made the data available to *Bellingcat*, who vouched for its authenticity. This failed to convince separatist supporters online, and there were consequences in the real world: "My parents' house was already searched twice. They [the pro-Russian fighters] were looking for me [laughing]. Then my house was set on fire" (Wowihay, 2015).

For professional journalists, the location and status of sources are significant considerations. From the reporter's point of view, an authoritative source is an identifiable eyewitness who

responds honestly to a reporter's questions, whose propagandistic, partisan, sympathiser or agnostic attitudes are unconcealed and transparent, and whose information is checkable.

Sympathisers

No doubt part of *Bellingcat*'s success is that it selects stories that coincide with those that international news media are also interested in pursuing. Inevitably, many of the *Bellingcat* investigations focus on providing counter-claims to Russian propaganda. Accordingly, it must be said that the *Bellingcat* investigators fall into the category of sympathisers. However, is debunking of propaganda genuinely possible if the organisation tasked with debunking only debunks the propaganda of one antagonist? *Bellingcat*'s brief attempt to monitor ceasefire violations only addressed those committed by one side – the separatists. Furthermore, the fact that *Bellingcat* now receives funding from Google and has worked with the Atlantic Council (Czuperski et al, 2015), a US think tank that promotes a stronger relationship between the Nato and the EU, has been held up as evidence that *Bellingcat* is partial. But the reports by the joint police investigation (Bellingcat, 2016) and the Dutch Air safety board both support *Bellingcat*'s claims relating to MH17, the former being confirmed by detectives from the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team (face-to-face interview in Antwerp, 19 September 2016) . Impartiality does not have to lead to covering each side 50 per cent. This is an important point that news organisations also struggle with. A BBC guide for its journalists on how to represent all ranges of opinion while maintaining impartiality concluded that a seesaw or 50-50 approach to balance does not always work well (BBC Trust, 2007). Such an approach can accord both sides equivalence, when that may not be the case. The sheer volume of fake news and propaganda coming from the Russian side means that outside investigators end up defining themselves in opposition to it. So *Bellingcat* has spent a lot of time trying to catch out the Russian state actors in Ukraine who said one thing and did another. *Bellingcat* has since come under cyber attack, apparently from the Russian authorities.

Agnostics

It is hard to find Ukrainians who can be said to be agnostic about the conflict. Of the news sources used by *Bellingcat*, there is only one news source that investigates propaganda and disinformation used by both sides: a website called *Stop Fake*, which was set up by academics based at Mohyla School of Journalism. They conduct simple checks to verify material for the benefit of the news audience:

> "*Bellingcat* [. . .] talks to expert groups and [they] do all these magic tweaks. We [on the other hand] call sources, check information, [and take] some easy steps to explain [things] to the very average media consumer" (Fedchenko, 2015).

Local people are not neutral but, as in many areas of conflict, many wish the armed men that appeared in their neighbourhoods would go away and leave them in peace. HuSnizhne (2015) points out: "What people agree among themselves is that they genuinely want the people with machine guns off the streets, nobody wants them there [...] Everybody is sick and tired of it".

The interviews revealed some of the *Bellingcat* source's other motivations for their work on social media. Dimitri Timchuk is an occasional *Bellingcat* source and a Ukrainian MP. He was in the military during the Soviet period and serves on the parliamentary defence committee. As he puts it, he 'curates' defence contracts. When asked what social media was good for, he related how he was able to use his large following on Facebook to put pressure on the government to pay up on [11]one of his defence contracts when it was late (Timchuk, 2016).

Discussion: the experiential affinities of journalists and parajournalists in Ukraine

The practical considerations affecting the work of reporters and sources — their *experiential affinities* — in Ukraine relate to transparency, the chaotic Ukrainian response to Russian propaganda, and the value that professional reporters add to amateur newsgathering. All these factors affect how Bellingcat collaborators, their sources, and the professional journalists who they work with understand their respective roles (Deacon 2008a: op. cit.). Dmitry Kisilyov runs the

Russia Today news agency, which is part of RT. “Objectivity is an outdated concept”, he claims. “Objectivity does not exist. There’s not one publication in the world that’s objective. Is CNN objective? No. Is the BBC objective? No. Objectivity is a myth” (Kisilyov, 2013). Others have long argued that objectivity is essentially bogus. So, while Michael Schudson (1978) says that the journalist’s job consists of reporting something called ‘news’ without commenting on it or shaping its formation, Gaye Tuchman (1972) describes objectivity as a ‘strategic ritual’ in which reporters sidestep their responsibility to interpret a story by simply attributing news accurately. However, Keeble and Reeves (2015: 153-154) suggest that transparency works better for modern online news gathering than objectivity. “Facts always support particular points of view [...] The very notion of objectivity discourages audience participation because it is presented as something that could not be challenged”. According to this view, transparency is more about the process of working through the evidence, while objectivity tends to stress the result. With objectivity, journalists are supposed to trust some sources more than others because they have more credibility. When sourcing is transparent, members of the news audience make their own mind up. Some say objectivity is the new transparency (Ingram, 2009; Goodman, 2014; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007). International news organisations may believe propaganda sites lack credibility, and quickly lose interest when trying to evaluate the claims and counter claims of hard-to-check self-appointed ‘news’ sources online. But perhaps the election of US President Donald Trump shows that news audiences prefer not to have their beliefs challenged. The current research does not address whether the Ukrainian propagandist websites’ audiences are dissatisfied with the narrowness or poor quality of the information they are being offered.

How does open source investigation in areas of conflict change journalism? The online news audience is saturated with amateur analysis. Simon Ostrovsky from *Vice News* says that if investigators on social media want to have an impact, they have to bring it to the real world in some way. If someone takes a screen grab of a photograph of a soldier, and circles some key elements on the photograph that they want other people to pay attention to, it is not sufficient to put it up on

Twitter and think their job is done. If that fact goes against the person's belief, the person will discard it as fake. Ostrovsky says that applying long-established journalistic principles is what makes the difference:

> You [...] have to follow the traditional rules of journalism, whether that is trying to track down the person who the photograph is about, to get their version of the events, or to verify their identity, speak with them on the phone, talk to their friends, meet them in person, see some real photographs. A lot of people [...] from social media [...] don't really know the rules. So it is not instinctual to them to do something besides taking the screen grab and distributing it: 'This guy is a soldier from such and such a division in Russia' and write a caption. [...] The right of reply is dressed up as something that is a right of a person who is being investigated but it is so much more than that. We call it the right of reply, but really it's a verification step" (Ostrovsky, 2015).

The reporting of the war in Ukraine is an example of a "pop-up news ecology" (Wall and Zahed, 2014: 15) that relies on ever more curation to focus attention on what is worthwhile in the "cacophony of alternative voices" (Wall and Zahed, 2014: 12). The main differences between the news ecology in Spain, examined by Deacon, and that in Ukraine are that more news sources are now available to professional reporters, and we know more about them. "The citizen, the amateur, the individual, the passionately partisan and the victim caught up in events all became categories of value, associated with claims to authenticity, the authority of personal experience and independence", according to Matheson and Allan (2009: 107). There is no longer any meaningful distinction between 'traditional' newsgathering techniques and open source verification. The techniques of online verification have become part of the repertoire of modern journalists, and it would be peculiar now for modern conflict reporters not to make use of social media to gather news.

When asked about their first contact with *Bellingcat*, sources unanimously said that *Bellingcat* first retweeted them, and only contacted them later. As one of the local aggregators put

it: “This is the problem with open source: first we post, then we check” (Wowihay, 2015). This is something that news organisations have also struggled with. Is it more important to be first with the news, or hold off publication to properly verify a story (Gowing, 1994: 27)? *Bellingcat* acknowledges that their sources are not completely trustworthy, but argues that it is important that they are diverse: “If they tweet something in tandem, it is more likely to be true rather than an organised disinformation campaign [equivalent to that conducted by the Russians]” (Toler, 2016).

Finally, the fact that a parajournalist acts like a journalist, or is commissioned by a journalist to gather information, also raises the question about what is distinctive about the role of the journalist in an information environment where there is a blurring of the differences between journalists and other participants. This way of working tends to flatten out some of the distinctions between witnesses and reporters. “It’s very hard to find anything without a hand from locals”, says a *Bellingcat* researcher who is a Russian native speaker, based in Kyiv (Mortis, 2015). He points out that in one of the posts from an aggregator, only a local person was in a position to confirm that ‘Cheryoma’ is neighbourhood slang term for the Cheryomyshki area near the Buk missile launch site. Journalists who are reluctant to expose themselves to the dangers of contemporary conflict reporting on the ground increasingly cover war from a distance. Professional international journalists use all types of locally hired newsgatherers, activists and parajournalists to report on their behalf (Palmer and Fontan, 2007; Murrell, 2015; Pendry, 2012: 14-20; Pendry, 2015: 12). Some of the most effective interpreters of material on social media are people who are just far enough removed to be safe, yet have the necessary language skills and understanding of the local ways, like Bellingcat’s aggregators.

[NOTE: PLEASE ADD CREDIT: Field researcher: Mari Bastashevski]

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