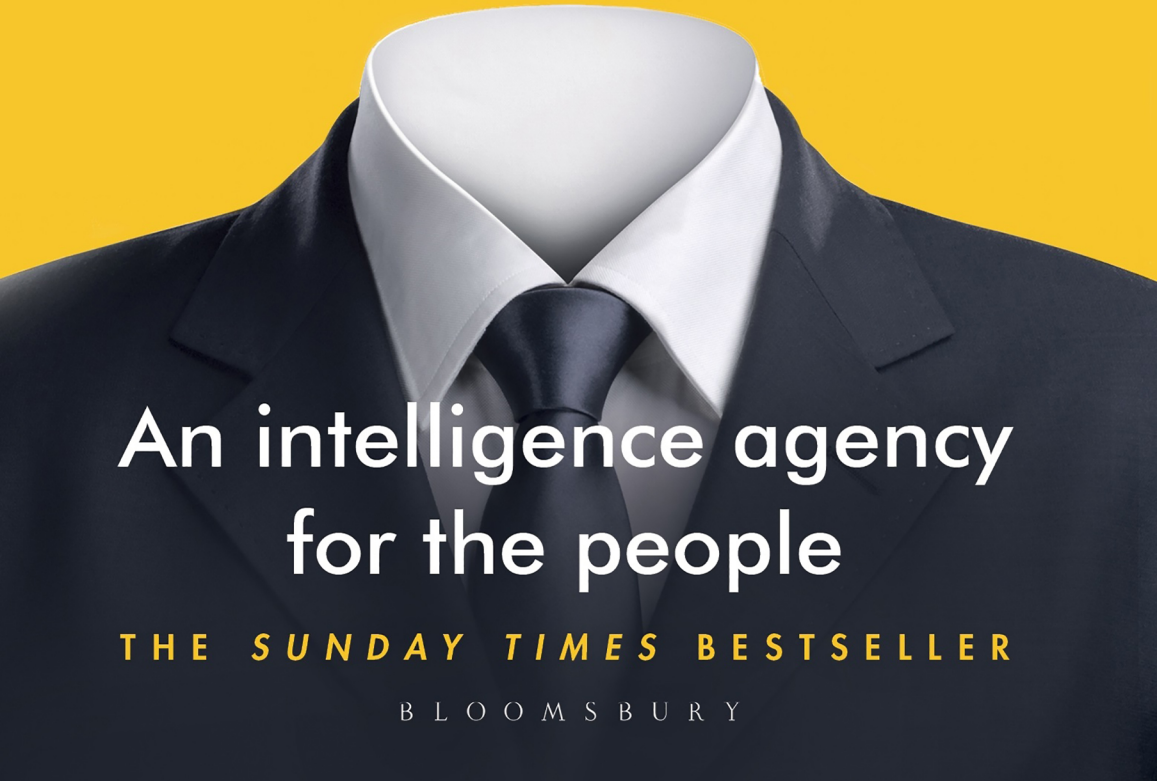


'Reads like a thriller' *New Statesman*



WE ARE BELLINGCAT



An intelligence agency
for the people

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

BLOOMSBURY

ELIOT HIGGINS is the founder and chief executive of Bellingcat, an independent international collective of researchers, investigators and citizen journalists using open-source and social media investigation to probe some of the world's most pressing stories. Higgins is a research fellow at UC Berkeley School of Law's Human Rights Centre, and is a member of the International Criminal Court's Technology Advisory Board.

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An Intelligence Agency for
the People

ELIOT HIGGINS

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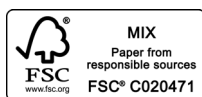
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Introduction

Government ministers hurried into an underground conference room in central London for the COBRA crisis-response meeting. A chemical weapons attack had taken place on British soil; it looked like an assassination attempt. The Skripals remained on ventilators in a hospital, pumped full of atropine, under sedation and under armed guard. Britain needed to respond. Suspicions turned to the Kremlin – one victim had been a former colonel in Russian military intelligence who had worked as a double agent for the British. On 4 March 2018, he and his daughter were found slumped on a bench in the peaceful English city of Salisbury, both on the verge of death. Moscow denied responsibility.

‘Our colleagues say with pathos, with serious faces that, if this was done by Russia, then the response will be such that Russia will remember it forever,’ said Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. ‘This is dishonest. This is pure propaganda, pure fanning of hysterics and hysteria.’¹

Yet the Kremlin had been implicated in revenge poisonings before, notably in the case of Alexander Litvinenko, another former Russian intelligence officer who had defected to Britain and become a scathing critic of President Vladimir Putin. On 1 November 2006, Litvinenko met two former KGB agents at

the Millennium Hotel in London. Later that night, he fell ill. Within weeks, he was dead of exposure to polonium-210.

By coincidence, the British defence lab that studies such poisons, Porton Down, happens to be a few miles outside Salisbury. Chemical-weapons experts there were urgently studying blood samples from the sixty-six-year-old Sergei Skripal and his thirty-three-year-old daughter, Yulia, trying to figure out what afflicted them. The results came back: Novichok A234, a nerve agent that the Soviet Union had developed in the 1970s and 1980s, back when Vladimir Putin was just an officer in the KGB. A smear on the skin could cause loss of vision, constricted breathing, incessant vomiting, convulsions, death. Intelligence analysts discovered that Russia had been intercepting communications between Skripal and his daughter before she flew from Moscow for a two-week holiday. Tracking Yulia, Russian operatives would have found her father.²

‘Either this was a direct act by the Russian state against our country,’ Prime Minister Theresa May told the House of Commons, ‘or the Russian government lost control of this potentially catastrophically damaging nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others.’ Moscow had forty-eight hours to explain itself. ‘Should there be no credible response, we will conclude that this action amounts to an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom. And I will come back to this House and set out the full range of measures that we will take in response.’³

Russian state-funded news outlets spread conspiracy theories, alleging that Britain held the Skripals against their will. Also, if the nerve agent had been military-grade, why weren’t the victims dead? This was a contention with a double effect, spreading doubt and menace at once, as if to say Kremlin violence would not have failed. The British expelled twenty-three Russian diplomats,

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identified as undeclared intelligence officers. Allied countries showed solidarity, throwing out their Russian ‘diplomats’, too. The United States sent home sixty, while imposing sanctions on banks and exports. Moscow retaliated with expulsions of its own.⁴

At Bellingcat, we watched, awaiting a point of entry. Scattered around the globe, we are an online collective, investigating war crimes and picking apart disinformation, basing our findings on clues that are openly available on the internet – in social-media postings, in leaked databases, in free satellite maps. Paradoxically, in this age of online disinformation, facts are easier to come by than ever. A core team of eighteen staffers works with scores of volunteers, producing reports seen by hundreds of thousands, including government officials, influential media figures, and policymakers. We have no agenda but we do have a credo: evidence exists and falsehoods exist, and people still care about the difference.

During the months after the attack, Sergei and Yulia Skripal recovered, but Scotland Yard struggled to solve the case. No surveillance cameras covered Sergei Skripal’s front door, which was the probable contamination site. Detectives gathered and watched 11,000 hours of local CCTV footage, pored over credit-card payments and studied mobile-phone usage in the area.⁵ As they sought answers, further poisonings occurred. A man from the Salisbury area whose addictions led him to scavenge in rubbish found what he thought was a bottle of Nina Ricci Premier Jour perfume and presented it to his girlfriend. She sprayed it on her wrists and became gravely ill. On 8 July, the hospital turned off her life support. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons analysed samples from this fake perfume bottle and confirmed that it contained Novichok. ‘The nerve agent is one of the rarest chemical warfare agents in

the world and its discovery, twice, in such close proximity is beyond a coincidence,' British counter-terrorism police said.⁶ The assassins seemed to have dumped the container, which was full of enough nerve agent to kill thousands of people.⁷

Six months after the Skripal attack, the police at last provided what we needed. Images showed two Russian men arriving at Gatwick Airport a couple of days before the poisoning, travelling together by train from London to Salisbury on consecutive days and lurking near the defector's home.⁸ The authorities needed help identifying these two, so published images of the suspects, who had travelled under the names 'Alexander Petrov' and 'Ruslan Boshirov'. Scotland Yard hoped someone might recognise them. The Kremlin certainly did.

'We know who they are, we have found them,' Putin said. 'I hope they will turn up themselves and tell everything. This would be best for everyone. There is nothing special there, nothing criminal, I assure you. We'll see in the near future.'⁹

The future comes fast when the president demands it: the following day, 13 September 2018, the two suspects materialised in an interview on the Kremlin's international news channel, RT. On the Bellingcat internal chat forum we fired messages back and forth, transfixed by this broadcast. The two men proclaimed themselves innocent, merely two friends who had taken a last-minute holiday to Britain to admire a provincial cathedral. 'Petrov' glared as if furious about appearing in public. 'Boshirov' winced, a sheen of sweat on his face. They were not assassins, they protested, just entrepreneurs in the fitness industry.

RT interviewer: What were you doing there?

Petrov: Our friends have been suggesting for quite a long time that we visit this wonderful city.

Interviewer: Salisbury? A wonderful city?

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Petrov: Yes.

Interviewer: What makes it so wonderful?

Boshirov: It's a tourist city. They have a famous cathedral there, Salisbury Cathedral. It's famous throughout Europe and, in fact, throughout the world, I think. It's famous for its 123-metre spire. It's famous for its clock. It's the oldest working clock in the world.

One day before the poisoning, the two burly Russians made their initial visit to Salisbury by train, a three-hour round trip from London, yet spent only thirty minutes there because, they said, the snow had put them off. The next day, they took the London–Salisbury trip again. They claimed not to have a clue where Skripal's house was. The interviewer inquired about the perfume bottle.

Boshirov: Don't you think that it's kind of stupid for two straight men to be carrying perfume for ladies? When you go through customs, they check all your belongings. So, if we had anything suspicious, they would definitely have questions. Why would a man have women's perfume in his bag? ...

Interviewer: Do you work for the GRU [military intelligence]?

Petrov (to interviewer): And you, do you?

Interviewer: Me? No, I don't, and you?

Petrov: I don't.

Boshirov: Me neither.¹⁰

Back on our internal message board, we were unanimous. These two were lying. 'Famous for its 123-metre spire'? Who spoke like that, as if reciting a Wikipedia entry? If the British

authorities could not determine who these men were, we would try. But there was little to go on. Photos of their faces. Their supposed names.

Within days, we had cracked the case.

Our Skripal investigations drew headlines around the world, and questions, too. How had a collective of self-taught internet sleuths identified a Russian ‘hit team’? Was that even plausible? Where had we come from? And what was ‘Bellingcat’?

The answers begin a decade ago, in that period when smartphones were beginning to spread globally and social media became the platform for personal relationships, opinions, images. Without intending to, humanity presented for public viewing the most revealing account of itself that the world had ever known. The innocents did not realise how much they were giving away. Nor did the guilty.

At the time I was just another computer enthusiast, an office worker in my early thirties with an unsatisfying job and an interest in the news. Then I had an epiphany. If you searched online, you could find facts that neither the press nor the experts knew yet. A smattering of other people had a similar realisation, and an online community drew together, converging around news events that had left clues on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and beyond. As our efforts progressed, we gained sophistication, teaching each other the latest investigative hacks, cobbling together what cohered into a new field, one that connects journalism and rights advocacy and crime investigation.

We proved that the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad fired chemical weapons at his own people. We showed who was behind the downing of Flight MH17. We located ISIS supporters in Europe. We identified neo-Nazis rampaging through Charlottesville, Virginia. We helped quash the floods of

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disinformation spreading alongside Covid-19. And we exposed a Kremlin ‘kill team’.

This discipline is so new that it lacks a single name. Most common is ‘OSINT’, for open-source intelligence. But that shorthand derives from government intelligence, whose secretive practices diverge from the open and public mission of Bellingcat. A more accurate description is ‘online open-source investigation’. What we do is far more than just internet research, though. We battle the counterfactual forces warping society. We insist on evidence. And we show ordinary citizens how to expose wrongdoing and demand accountability from the powerful.

The private investigator Michael Bazzell – a guru of open-source techniques – used to pursue criminals in his work for the FBI, trawling databases so expensive that they excluded amateurs. ‘But today with OSINT, I’d say 98-plus percent of everything I need to find out about someone, I don’t need to pay for anymore. That’s where I really jumped into the OSINT side,’ he says. ‘It dawned on me that anyone can have this.’¹¹

When General Michael Flynn ran the Defense Intelligence Agency (before disgracing himself in the Trump administration), he remarked that secret sources used to contribute 90 per cent of valuable intelligence. After the arrival of social media, it was the opposite: 90 per cent of worthy intelligence came from open sources, available to all.¹²

Spy agencies have always gathered open-source intelligence, poring over newspapers and listening to radio broadcasts. But they tended to disdain such material, preferring clandestine sources, which justified their immense budgets and influence. For the rest of us, there was a problem with secret intel: we had to trust those who controlled it. Public trust has been brittle since the Iraq War, when the US-led coalition justified invasion with

claims about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction that proved unfounded.

Social mistrust today has become a broader problem than just the masses doubting the elites. Citizens view other citizens with deep suspicion, each political tribe inside its own information bubble. There is the temptation to consider oneself – readers of books like this, opponents of disinformation – as a different grade of human from those who fall for deception and conspiracy theories. Yet much of what each of us believes is just what someone else once told us. That makes experts vital. But they are not sufficient anymore. Allowing truth to become a matter of group loyalty has been a disaster. Today, claims must be laid out for all to see. The Bellingcat method is that: click the links and check our conclusions for yourself.

Years ago, the internet was advertised as a cyberutopia around the corner. Lately, public opinion has swung in the opposite direction. The digital era is viewed as a wrecking ball, smashing journalism, civility and politics. At Bellingcat, we do not accept this cyber-miserabilism. The marvels of the internet can still have an impact for the better. However, guarding society and upholding truth are not the exclusive domain of institutions anymore. It is for all of us.

This is not about Top Secret clearance, or restricting information to the initiated. Bellingcat is something that has never been before: an intelligence agency for the people.

Revolution on a Laptop

The discovery of online investigation

Following afternoon prayers on 2 February 2011, buses pulled up at Tahrir Square. For days, thousands of protesters had engulfed this traffic circle in the centre of Cairo, demanding the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak, dictator of Egypt for thirty years. The men on the buses disembarked, holding machetes, clubs and straight razors. They had not arrived to join the protesters, but to assault them.

At first they circled, issuing threats. Elsewhere, men on horseback rode in. A few had saddled up camels, and charged the crowd, brandishing swords. The boldest demonstrators sought to form a perimeter. But attacks came from above, too, supporters of the regime flinging bricks from rooftops and pouring boiling water on fleeing protesters. Facing clouds of tear gas, demonstrators clutched wet rags to their mouths. Soldiers merely looked on as journalists were targeted, too. Protesters dug up the roads, grabbing rocks to defend themselves. A tank commander, confounded by the order to do nothing to protect the innocent, thrust a gun in his mouth, threatening to kill himself rather than stand by. Other soldiers just abandoned their posts. By night, pitched battles still flared, but many reporters

had left to file their stories. With the battle lines surging and receding, those who roamed outside faced injury.

One journalist, Andy Carvin of National Public Radio, held his position that entire day, piecing together a running narrative of the Battle of the Camel. He never needed to take cover or press a vinegar-soaked rag to his mouth against the tear gas. He sat at a computer in Washington DC, chronicling the Arab Spring through social media. ‘With each incoming tweet, the better I could visualize the situation on the ground,’ he later wrote. ‘The people tweeting from Tahrir had their own extraordinary perspective – but it was limited to each’s immediate field of view. There was no way for them to report on what was going on everywhere.’

‘I imagined myself flying over Tahrir in a helicopter, looking down at the field of battle,’ he explained. ‘It was coming together in my mind – a situational awareness I probably couldn’t have achieved on the ground.’¹

For months, Carvin tweeted up to eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, recounting the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, Syria. Often, he exceeded 1,000 tweets in a day – so many that Twitter once blocked his account, mistaking him for a spammer.² Foreign correspondents, who pride themselves on rushing towards danger, tended to view this work as not true reporting. But for a news industry struggling with financial cuts, outsourcing research to social media was an attractive option. The problem was that many of those who tweeted were activists with agendas. How could journalists – reading tweets from afar, without knowing the local language, let alone the cultural context – get it right?

The Arab Spring raised what was to become the most serious news question of the digital age: verification. How to say if this stuff was true? How to know *what* you were looking at?

I was asking myself this same question at my admin job in Leicester, where I spent downtime at my desk viewing live-streaming video, filmed from a hotel window over Tahrir Square. The police pushed back protesters, then the police were themselves repelled, creating an odd theatre: crowds rolling out, crowds rolling in, tear gas fogging the scene, rocks soaring through the air, water cannons spraying.

Long before, I had considered becoming a journalist, perhaps even covering stories like this from the ground. But I had not thrived at college and dropped out, taking a series of office jobs that left me unsatisfied. From afar, I watched politicians and celebrities and journalists as if they were another breed. I found no place in the larger world, and had no prospect of ever having an impact. Instead, I took refuge in online video games, which I played with obsessive devotion, organising large groups of players spread across various countries. But when 9/11 happened, my interests shifted. News was happening so fast, and papers were so slow. I wanted to know more, and discovered an online message board, Something Awful, that was full of argument and insight on almost any topic imaginable. I gained a new obsession: current affairs. By 2011, the most compelling part of my day came each morning, when I arrived far too early at the office. Alone at my computer, I scoured the internet for the latest updates on the Arab Spring.

Among the best sources was Middle East Live, a breaking-news blog on the *Guardian* website. What captivated me were threads on the Libyan civil war, which had broken out after the country's long-time dictator, Muammar Gaddafi, violently suppressed protests in the eastern city of Benghazi. The result was armed rebellion, involving men without formal military training but with AK-47s, leaping on pick-up trucks and driving to the front line. Gaddafi warned them: 'I'm going to march with the

masses, to purify Libya inch by inch, house by house, room by room, street by street, one by one, until the country is cleansed of filth.’ In March 2011, the UN Security Council authorised attacks to protect civilians, and NATO launched airstrikes against the government.³ The war turned in the rebels’ favour. They pushed towards the capital, Tripoli, and Gaddafi’s hometown of Sirte from rebel strongholds in Misrata, Benghazi and the Nafusa Mountains.

I studied every English-language article I could find, scrolled through Something Awful message boards, and scanned the Twitter feeds of Carvin and others. The internet was cut off across Libya, so limited information emerged. A few vociferous Twitter accounts made claims – but they tended to have a strong bias, either pro-revolution or pro-Gaddafi. To evaluate their assertions, I also studied the tweets of foreign correspondents travelling through the war zone. These reporters, I noticed, gathered more material than they could fit into their published articles. Twitter was where they emptied their notebooks, including facts I had not read anywhere else.

In mid-August 2011, a group of journalists happened to drive past the town of Tawergha, not far from a rebel stronghold, Misrata. They observed buildings burning. However, bigger news was happening in a key government-held city, Sirte, where fighting was underway. Only later did the world learn of what had happened in Tawergha. The town had been a pro-Gaddafi stronghold, and when rebels took control they exacted revenge, ordering 10,000 residents to flee. Afterwards, they burned and vandalised Tawergha, turning it into a ghost town.⁴ Those tweets – habitations on fire, glimpsed from car windows – were the first clues to an act of ethnic cleansing.

Anytime I found an intriguing detail that news articles had no space for, I posted it on Something Awful and in the comments

section of the *Guardian* live blog. I became competitive, trying to post overlooked items before anyone else. Each morning at work I trawled through material that had popped up overnight about Libya, compiling a summary of links. Over the months, I broadened my sources, throwing in reports from human rights groups, YouTube footage, statements on Facebook, photos from Tumblr. My niche, as it developed in thousands of posts, was the detail. I never attempted to tell a complete story, as a news reporter strives to do. I unearthed nuggets that others might use.

This simple ambition proved more important than I realised. An alternative-media ecosystem was expanding in those days, with plenty of dubious websites misrepresenting videos and images to win political arguments. By contrast, I had no personal connection to the Arab Spring, and no partisan views. I was just fascinated, and I hungered for extra titbits. Plenty circulated but plenty were false. My focus became *valid* information. I cited all sources, making it clear where information derived from, always acknowledging the limits of my knowledge. This approach developed into what would become a guiding principle at Bellingcat: the response to information chaos is transparency.

In the early morning of Friday 12 August 2011, I impatiently loaded up the computer at my office, wondering what the Arab Spring had in store. Hundreds of thousands of people had been demonstrating in Yemen, demanding the ousting of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was recuperating after an assassination attempt. In Syria, security forces had opened fire on pro-democracy protesters in several cities – President Bashar al-Assad was refusing to cede power.⁵ And in Libya, fighting had intensified for key towns such as Brega, a settlement of a few thousand people on the northern shores of Africa at the southernmost point of the Mediterranean.

A charmless outpost, Brega had become a battlefield because it contained an oil refinery, an airstrip and a strategic port. After six months of fighting, Gaddafi's army occupied it but were set on by rebels, marking a possible turning point in the civil war.⁶ Combat raged in the east of the town, with artillery shells blasting down in both directions. The evening before, rebels had claimed to control part of Brega. But today, 12 August, the Libyan government said that *it* controlled Brega.⁷

A rebel video appeared on YouTube. This was part of a new genre, the soldier selfie, where combatants brag of their conquests to the camera. In shaky footage, a shaven-headed, bearded gunman walked confidently around what he claimed was newly captured Brega. The buildings were shuttered, and the streets empty but for a handful of fellow rebels in desert camouflage. This could have been evidence of victory. Then again, the rebels might have been lying.⁸

While traditional journalists guard exclusives from competitors, the online ethos was to post anything of interest and make sense of it together, pooling insights. The collaborative spirit marked online investigation from the start and infuses Bellingcat to this day. But the assertion of facts online also led to furious disputes, with anonymous supporters of one side or another railing against findings that challenged their preferred narrative. When I posted in the comments of the *Guardian* live blog, linking to that footage of the rebel claiming his forces controlled Brega, another commenter slapped me down. *How is that proof of anything? Do you KNOW this is Brega? Could've been filmed ANYWHERE.*

The person had a point. How could I, who had never visited the town, say this was Brega at all? I watched the video again, looking for something to identify. A clue like a shop sign would

not have helped me since I could not read Arabic. The soldier's face filled most of the frame as he spoke. In the background were single-storey, white-walled concrete buildings and lampposts, all jumping in his shaky camerawork.

I clicked pause and took a lap around the empty office to clear my thoughts. Stopping at the printer, I helped myself to a piece of paper, picked up a pen and reran the YouTube video at my desk. Again, the soldier was talking, striding through the two-lane streets, turning this way and that. I kept pausing, sketching the roadways around him, creating a little street map. He started up a sharply curving road, turned left at the T-junction, passed an armed rebel seated on the corner, reached another T-junction, turned left again.⁹ I went to Google Maps, typed in 'Brega' and switched to a mode that superimposes satellite imagery over the road map. The town had three residential areas. One contained multi-storey buildings. Nope, not there – my video showed low-rise concrete houses. The western and eastern residential areas looked more plausible. I studied each, checking the layout against my scrawled fragment of a map. On the sketch, I didn't even know which way was north. I kept rotating it and checking it against the satellite image.

I noticed something: only the eastern residential area had curving roads. That was a start. Still, I was looking at a labyrinth of roadways on Google Maps. I kept rotating my drawn shape until, suddenly, it fitted the street layout, exactly as on the Google map. To double-check, I replayed the video, homing in on every background detail. If I was right, everything needed to match up. That open area visible behind the cameraman, for example – was that in the satellite image? Yes.¹⁰ Everything fitted. I had it. And I had a mini scoop. What my finding meant was that the rebels had taken part of Brega, specifically the eastern residential

quarter called New Brega. That explained how Gaddafi loyalists could also claim that they held Brega – they may have been in the western quarter.

Seated in my office in Middle England, I had clarified the front line of a war zone thousands of miles away. All I had needed was a YouTube clip and Google Maps, aided by a sketch on printer paper. I fast-typed my findings into the *Guardian* live-blog comments, and tweeted a copy of my drawing, aligned on a map. In the years to come, Twitter would become my main outlet to disseminate findings; by now, I have tweeted a quarter of a million times. But this was only my seventh tweet. I was just setting out. But already, I had found evidence nobody else had, not even the journalists on the ground. I watched as my discovery filtered through the message boards. Even news professionals took note.

This was a rush, and it contained a revelation. With a bit of a brain shift, you could construe video images from a top-down perspective, flattening the distraction of three dimensions, transforming wobbly footage into something as precise as a map. From there, it became a matching game. I had stumbled across ‘geolocation’, as we came to call it – the first technique of the digital detective.

At every opportunity I sought to regain the thrill of that discovery. On my next workday, Monday 15 August 2011, Libyan rebels were claiming to have captured the small town of Tiji and they posted a video online as proof. The five-minute clip showed gunfire in a nearly featureless desert setting. Towards the end, the cameraman filmed a tank driving down a road, passing a mosque. Tiji is a small town, so there could not have been many mosques. The road itself had clues to narrow the search. It contained a small median strip dividing the lanes. Pausing the clip, I estimated that the lane closest to the camera

was about two tanks wide. Across from the mosque were single-storey buildings.

I found Tiji on Google Maps and switched to the satellite-image view. A simple search turned up a listing of mosques in Tiji, which allowed me to check the roads where each was located, seeing if any layout matched that in the video. Promptly, I had a suitable road, including a mosque whose minaret was on the south side. In this video, the minaret was on the side closest to the road, with the dome to the right of the minaret – this matched the satellite imagery. Also present in both video and satellite images were trees visible behind the tank as it drove by; a wall outside the mosque; and the northward curve of the road. The more details I compared, the more matches I made. Everything was lining up. The day after, I pinned down the location of a video of a burning Gaddafi billboard, geolocating it via Google Maps to the south-western oasis of Sabha. And on I went, posting all to the *Guardian* live blog. Previously, I had been a passive consumer of news, scavenging from others' findings. Now, I had findings of my own. The incoming flow of social-media information only seemed unfathomable. If you sorted it shrewdly, you might detect something.

On 20 October 2011, rebels converged around a drainage pipe on the outskirts of Sirte. From the garbage-strewn hole, they dragged a sixty-nine-year-old with the most recognisable face in the country. Gaddafi was dazed, bloodied and finally deposed. He looked around, bewildered, asking the rebels, 'What did I do to you?' A mob dragged Gaddafi across the sand while others held up camera phones. They tore his shirt and beat him. Soon, Gaddafi lay dead, and the footage was online.¹¹

But history was no longer written by the victors alone. The defeated, the passer-by, the neighbour – they had smartphones, too.

THE PRESS IS DYING, LONG LIVE THE NEWS

When I posted findings to the *Guardian* comments section or on Something Awful message boards, they appeared briefly, only to vanish under pages of subsequent entries. I wanted to keep an archive of discoveries, so began a blog under my long-time online handle, Brown Moses, taken from the name of a Frank Zappa song.

The Brown Moses blog, I decided, would deal with more than Libya; it should accommodate any subject. And those subjects kept increasing. After the death of Gaddafi, the news junkies who followed the Arab Spring shifted their attention elsewhere in the region, especially to the worsening conflict in Syria. The Assad regime kept arresting and killing protesters, the opposition took up arms and the conflict degenerated. Social media was full of claims and counterclaims, which made much to dig into. But first, I found myself delving into a news story about news itself.

The phone-hacking scandal tore apart elements of the British newspaper industry in 2011, exposing a pattern of illegal and immoral behaviour. With the rise of cell phones in the 1990s, tabloid reporters had discovered that they could call newsmakers' mobile numbers, reach voicemail, input the default code that few bothered to change and listen to private messages. Unscrupulous journalists used this trick, among other underhanded practices such as bribing police officers, to report articles as if they had obtained information from legitimate sources. I wondered if I could find further clues to these misdeeds online. There was irony in this. I was about to apply a new form of investigative journalism, entirely based on open sources, to expose the old ways of investigative journalism, which thrived on closed sources.

At the heart of the scandal was a prized part of Rupert Murdoch's media empire, the *News of the World*, the best-selling newspaper in Britain with 3.5 million copies every Sunday, more than triple the circulation of the daily *New York Times*.¹² 'To begin with, when libelled, or when my privacy was egregiously invaded, I did take legal action,' the actor Hugh Grant, who became a vocal opponent of tabloid malfeasance, explained in 2011. 'What I didn't do was openly criticize the worst practices of some papers. This would have been, and still is, to invite brutal editorial revenge.'¹³ Politicians were equally fearful of the Murdoch press, which included the best-selling daily the *Sun* and establishment organ *The Times*. If the Murdoch empire disliked members of parliament, it meant surveillance of their private lives and attempts to destroy them through public humiliation.¹⁴ But it was the case of Milly Dowler, a thirteen-year-old girl murdered by a serial killer in 2002, that led to the unspooling of this system. When she went missing and her fate was unknown, tabloid journalists illicitly listened to her voicemails. Her family noticed that the schoolgirl's voicemails had been deleted, and gained false hope that Milly was still alive. Once all this came to light in 2011, the public¹⁵ recognised that predatory techniques harmed more than celebrities and politicians.¹⁶

After the scandal broke, there were so many cases and so many details that much never made it into print. But they did appear online. This included a massive leak of emails that I hoped might prove ties between corrupt policemen and the Murdoch press. The leak consisted of 14,400 messages from the laptop of a former top police officer, Ray Adams, who had quit the force and joined the Murdoch empire. *The Australian Financial Review* acquired the emails as unsorted raw text files, and asked the public for help digging through them.¹⁷ A tiny number of us discussing the case most obsessively on Something

Awful leapt to the task, and I posted their best findings on my blog, from what I thought showed links between hackers and a News Corporation subsidiary,¹⁸ to references to an apparent slush fund. Ray Adams, for his part, denied any wrongdoing.

What took shape were the early flickers of the online investigative community. We were a small group, and I had no vision of what we would achieve in a few years; I was simply pleased to see my blog hit 10,000 page views in its first full month, April 2012. I promoted my blogging through Twitter, where I still had only a few hundred followers. The currency of our community was verified information – who found the fact did not matter greatly, except to flag that person as someone worth following on Twitter. The same principle remains at Bellingcat. Open-source investigation is not about formal qualifications. Your reputation is your results.

This was epitomised by my first close collaborator, a gifted online detective without the slightest background in journalism. She was a retired history teacher who ran a guesthouse in the West Country, and had followed the phone-hacking scandal closely, appalled by what she read. We noticed each other's contributions on the Something Awful message boards, and I asked if she would consider writing a post for Brown Moses. She preferred anonymity, so became 'The Regular Contributor'.

The Regular Contributor trawled through hundreds of hours of testimony in the phone-hacking inquiry, unearthing links to previous cases, searching online company records for financial ties among suspects, scouring digitised court records. She brought the meticulousness of a historian in dusty archives to the wilds of the internet. The Regular Contributor helped earn my blog an avid audience of people unsatisfied by phone-hacking coverage in the news media, including journalists themselves, even a few politicians. Many speculated that my contributor

might be a senior member of parliament or a mole in the media. The truth was more telling. Newspapers based their sales on the notion that they alone accessed the corridors of power as the average citizen could not. They cultivated confidential sources and wielded influence to extract what they wanted. By contrast, the Regular Contributor wanted no glory and had no sway. ‘If someone heard a tip from an insider, I wasn’t going to use it,’ she recalled. ‘There were other people who had contacts and leads and moles, and that’s not me.’

In hindsight, the phone-hacking scandal had a lasting impact, deepening an existing stereotype of journalists as a sleazy elite, both corrupt and corrupting. This reputation, which fails to distinguish between the ruthless reporters and the responsible, has been exploited by politicians (most notoriously President Donald Trump), with convenient dismissals of facts as ‘fake news’. As for Brown Moses, the phone-hacking scandal stood as a vital first stop, one that helped shape the Bellingcat method. I knew with absolute clarity that our work must stand in opposition to the worst traditional journalism. Our sourcing would remain as open to public scrutiny as possible. Political agendas should have nothing to do with our work. And evidence-based citations had to underpin all findings. Lastly, we would never become a closed trade whose selling point was proximity to power. We were an open community of amateurs on a collaborative hunt for evidence.

The media critic Jay Rosen anticipated the rise of citizen journalism, predicting years ago that it would gain influence as the institutions clutching the levers of information lost control. ‘The people formerly known as the audience wish to inform media people of our existence, and of a shift in power,’ Rosen wrote in 2006. ‘A highly centralized media system had connected people “up” to big social agencies and centers of power but not

“across” to each other. Now the horizontal flow, citizen-to-citizen, is as real and consequential as the vertical one.’¹⁹

SYRIA: THE WAR THAT JOURNALISTS COULD NOT COVER

If tabloid manipulation represented the ugliest side of reporting, Marie Colvin of the *Sunday Times* stood for its nobler motives. In early 2012, she was among the few foreign journalists to risk a trip to Homs, a Syrian city under bombardment from the Assad regime. An experienced war correspondent of fifty-six, she was renowned for courage and her distinctive eye patch, worn because of a wound in another war zone.²⁰ ‘It’s a complete and utter lie that they’re only going after terrorists,’ she told CNN via satellite linkup. ‘The Syrian Army is simply shelling a city of cold, starving civilians.’²¹ The following day, Assad forces attacked a makeshift media centre, killing Colvin herself. Some believe that the live TV linkups hours before allowed them to obtain GPS coordinates of her location.

After Colvin’s death, even fewer Western journalists dared to enter Syria. In their absence, the war grew crueller. Its evils would have been hidden from international view, were it not for the internet. More than any conflict in history, this war included social media as a component of the fighting, with combatants and victims alike chronicling bombardment and weaponry on hundreds of YouTube channels and blogs, desperate for outsiders to take their side. Back in 1982, the Syrian regime had crushed an uprising in the city of Hama, killing thousands of people; the exact number is unknown because the authorities concealed the crime. ‘But today we have the internet,’ a Syrian rebel remarked in 2012. ‘We photograph and film and have Al Jazeera, so people know. They can see what is happening.’²² The government tried to halt that, cutting electricity and landlines, while disabling