

Intelligence in Public Media

We Are Bellingcat: An Intelligence Agency for the People

Eliot Higgins (Bloomsbury, 2021), 255 pages, bibliography, index.

***Untraceable* (A novel)**

Sergei Lebedev, translation by Antonina W. Bouis (New Vessel Press, reprint in translation, 2021), 236 pages in print, reviewed in Kindle edition.

Reviewed by J.E. Leonardson

We are Bellingcat

Plagued as we are these days by disinformation campaigns and bizarre conspiracy theories, it is easy to wonder if anyone is working effectively to combat them. Thankfully, the answer is yes, and Eliot Higgins, the founder of Bellingcat, the best-known and most influential private organization involved in these efforts, tells the story in a combination memoir and call to arms, *We Are Bellingcat*.^a It might be a stretch to call Bellingcat an “intelligence agency for the people,” as Higgins does, but his book is well worth reading, both as a methodological primer and also for a glimpse of how the worlds of intelligence and journalism may be converging.^b

In 2011, Higgins was a college dropout stuck in a boring office job and unsure what to do with his life. Intrigued by the Arab Spring and then the revolts in Libya and Syria, he began following events by reading blogs, watching video clips, and following social media posts. Trying to confirm the veracity of what he saw, Higgins began using such basic internet tools as Google Maps to geolocate where videos had been shot. He then began posting his findings to the comments sections of various blogs before starting one of his own. From there, Higgins connected with other knowledgeable observers and volunteers to undertake meticulous analyses of information—perhaps we can call this CROWDINT?—gleaned from tweets and other social media posts, and videos and still photographs. By the summer of 2013, his blog had become an authoritative source on the Syrian war and the Assad regime’s atrocities and use of chemical weapons.

a. The name is taken from a fable in which mice, seeking warning of the approach of a local cat decide to hang a bell around its neck.

b. The Bellingcat mission, various interrelationships, and funding sources can be found at <https://www.bellingcat.com/about/>

What really put Higgins and his collaborators, by then calling themselves Bellingcat, on the map was their investigation into the shootdown of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) over Ukraine in July 2014. Higgins recounts how, after months of combing through cell phone and dashcam videos on YouTube, tweets, and postings on Facebook, Bellingcat was able to document the movements of the Russian air defense unit and, within it, the particular surface-to-air missile launcher that destroyed MH17. Eventually, Bellingcat’s contributors used these tools to identify the individual officers and others responsible for the attack.^c

Russia, not surprisingly, since then has provided Bellingcat with a steady source of investigative projects. After MH17, Bellingcat’s next major case was the nerve agent poisoning of Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, England, in 2018. Starting with clues released by British authorities and gleaned from Moscow’s clumsy denials, Bellingcat set out to identify the GRU hit men. Moscow, learning from the MH17 experience, at the same time tried to scrub all traces of the culprits from the web and social media sites. In response, Bellingcat volunteers widened their search methods to include scouring the internet for obscure documents that could help penetrate false identities and piece together true biographies. (Been to a wedding in the past decade? Any idea if your face is in the background of a photo still on some other guest’s Facebook page?) Most notably, to pursue leads they started to purchase Russian databases on the black market and in some instances, specific files from individuals with access to closed databases. Bellingcat eventually not

c. Posts on Bellingcat’s website detail how the organization used these techniques to investigate the nerve agent poisoning of Russian opposition leader Aleksei Navalny in 2020, a case too recent to have been included in this book.

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only identified the would-be killers but also the chain of command and others involved in the attack.

Small wonder that the Russian government and its trolls have sought to discredit Bellingcat at every turn. Moscow's efforts to deny and confuse by sowing disinformation and outright lies have failed, however, and make it clear that Higgins is right when he says that disseminating clear, accurate information is key to defeating the disinformation that plagues our world today. Higgins documents in detail the methods Bellingcat uses to collect information and, as he points out several times, how the organization maintains its credibility by insisting on rigorous fact-checking and transparency in sourcing—methods it propagates in workshops that Bellingcat's website says it offers and derives income from. Higgins claims that Bellingcat's "firewall of facts," as he calls it, always defeats the "counterfactual community"—the trolls, cynics, and extremist conspiracy theorists of the alt-right and alt-left "who begin with a conclusion, skip verification and shout down contradictory facts"—because "when citizens can see the facts for themselves, lying becomes a fool's mission." (116, 123).

One place where Higgins is wrong, however, is in his assertion that his "intelligence service for the people" is a new, exciting creation. In fact, it looks more like he is replicating a traditional intelligence service. Higgins notes several times, for example, that Bellingcat relies on collaboration by ordinary citizens. As he identifies these partners, though, it becomes clear that not all of Bellingcat's contributors are as ordinary as he suggests—a former Stasi analyst, a professor of visual computing, experts in various types of weapons, and people with the skill and patience to spend days searching for information—but, instead, sound a lot like the types of specialists long found at CIA and other traditional state services. Moreover, his description of finding people in Russia who are willing to sell specific bits of information sounds like traditional targeting and recruitment, and the thoroughness of Bellingcat's searches of social media and the most obscure corners of the web would make our own open-source analysts proud. Finally, Higgins's discussion of threats to Bellingcat's people and computer systems leaves one wondering how long it will be before he sets up his own security and counterintelligence apparatus.

This is an engaging and informative book, and despite his justified pride in Bellingcat's work and its influence on legacy media—the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* have adopted some of Bellingcat's geolocation

and presentation methods for stories on their websites, and other journalists have started to use illicitly acquired Russian data—Higgins mostly avoids slipping into self-congratulation.^a What remains unclear is where Bellingcat will fit into the information world. Is Bellingcat an intelligence agency for the people? Perhaps, but aren't the services in Western democracies working for their people, too, however imperfectly? Aren't the efforts of Western services to uncover the truth—efforts legally constrained by concerns for privacy and civil rights that do not limit Bellingcat—just as sincere? Higgins has high hopes for a future in which Bellingcat and its open-source work are at the forefront of a global fight against lies and disinformation, and for justice. As admirable as this is, our own experience has shown that idealism does not always work out the way we hope. Rather than alter the world of intelligence and save the wider world, Bellingcat likely will remain what it is today: a valuable contributor to the perpetual struggle to protect open societies, but far from the only player.



Untraceable (a novel)

While Bellingcat sought to establish the hard truth of the attempt on Sergei Skripal's life, the prolific Russian novelist Sergei Lebedev uses the nerve agent attack as a starting point for exploring Russia's practice of using the intelligence services for murder abroad.^b *Untraceable* begins with the use of an exotic poison to kill a former Russian intelligence officer who long ago defected to the West. Another defector, Kalitin, a chemist who developed nerve agents in a closed Soviet city, is called on to assist with the investigation. Learning this, the GRU dispatches Lt. Col. Shershnev and a technical assistant to kill Kalitin with a dose of Neophyte, an untraceable nerve agent that was the chemist's greatest creation. Alternating between the two, *Untraceable* tells the story of the hunter pursuing the quarry who, while always on his guard, has no knowledge of the actual looming threat.

This is an unusual, and unusually good, spy story. Lebedev uses only a minimal amount of dialogue and, even as the suspense builds, none of the action usually found in a spy thriller. Instead, he relies on the inner thoughts of his characters and flashbacks to explore what

a. For the spreading use of illicitly-obtained data in the media, see "How Investigative Journalism Flourished in Hostile Russia," *New York Times*, Feb. 22, 2021.

b. *Traceable* is Antonina W. Bouis' fourth translation of a Lebedev novel since 2016.

motivates them, how they cope with the moral quandaries of their work and pasts, and tell how each came to this point in his life. *Untraceable* is a thinking person's spy novel, working the same territory as *Darkness at Noon*, and one that leaves the reader with a lot to ponder. In the hands of Antonina Bouis, who has translated several of Lebedev's novels into English, *Untraceable*'s spare prose

makes for an easy read that still lets its sly sense of humor come through. After all, most of us have had operational assignments in which so many small things have gone wrong that we, as does Shershnev, began to wonder if they were all being orchestrated by the opposition or a higher power.



The reviewer: J. E. Leonardson is the penname of an analyst in CIA's Directorate of Analysis.

