Robert E. Lee & Volunteer Networks to Solve Crime
What Happens Next – 10.3.2021
Eliot Higgins Q&A

Larry Bernstein:

You know, your description of disinformation by the state actor reminds me of something that you mentioned in the book about the Kremlin's disinformation plan. You called it a four D approach; dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay. Can you tell us a little bit about that methodology employed by the Kremlin?

Eliot Higgins:

Yes, so often we have these four Ds and it is how the Kremlin approaches their messaging. So for example, very recently we've had a development in this Skripal poisoning case in the UK where the UK government announced they were charging a third suspect that Bellingcat had actually identified two years ago. And the reaction from the head of the Russian intelligence services was to claim that, oh, this is actually just a distraction from the current situation in the UK with regards to our gas prices. And this is the kind of thing they say a lot. They try to point in another direction. "Oh, it's actually about this thing. It's not really about the thing they're talking about. It's about this other thing." So, that's kind of like the distracting. It's also another form, similar to dismay, where they say, "Oh, well, it's just the British again, making a noise about this Skripal case to try and kind of distract from the problems in the UK. Isn't it ridiculous?"

So they are kind of horrified that the British will dare do such a thing. This is such a terrible thing. You can see if it's straightforward lying, and we see that all the time with Russia, and I think with the cases I've described in my opening, you see that all the time. I mean, with MH17, three days after MH17 was shot down, they were presenting fake evidence. Photo-shopped satellite imagery lying about radar imagery after 298 people had been killed by one of their missiles.

And they will lie just at the drop of a hat. They'd lie as easy as they breathe. When you work on this topic, it's quite shocking to see the different levels of government, how this happens. And this is even something that has targeted myself and Bellingcat. The Russian government has previously described us as part of the intelligence services and paid for by the UK government and all these other allegations against us that they've no evidence whatsoever to back up, but if they make it in a public statement, then they have lots of loyal media that will go ahead and report that.

Larry Bernstein:

Members of our audience aren't as familiar with Bellingcat. Could you tell us a little bit how you got started and how you use network effects and open source to gather information to uncover war crimes and other malfeasance?

Eliot Higgins:

With the introduction of smartphones and the launch of the iPhone, that then led to social media sharing apps and lots of information being shared all the time by people across the world. Basically, people are going around with a phone that was effectively a sensor for all kinds of information. They'd take photographs, film it, it would appear online.

But early on, I was just some ordinary guy on internet, and I was just interested in what was happening in Libya in 2011. And I realized you could use these videos coming from Libya to actually get a much greater understanding about the conflict, because rather than being a journalist on the ground with one point of view, you had lots of people putting videos online that you could then verify through various processes.

One which became key to the entire field is something called geo location, where you look at features in a video like mountains and buildings, and you can match that off to satellite imagery. And if you've watched the documentary, *Don't F with Cats*," then you'll see, they're basically doing open source investigation. But we basically turned it into a whole field of investigation and our first big story... And when I say we, it was at first a group of just volunteers and a little bit of money for a website, but we started looking into the downing of Malaysian Airline 17 and using publicly available information, be it social media posts or satellite imagery.

We started reconstructing what happened. First of all, by tracking the route of a missile launcher that was heading towards the site of a missile launch just before MH-17 was shut down and then using open source videos of people filming a military convoy in Russia along a very long route, which had the same missile launcher in it, to connect that missile launcher to Russia. Then using the social media pages of the military unit in question to identify every single officer, their rank and who was in the convoy in that military unit.

So we kind of built it up into a bigger and bigger thing, and that then expanded into a whole range of different investigations. And probably what we're best known for at the moment is our investigations into Russia's assassinations. So starting with the attempted assassination of Sergei Scripal in Salisbury in 2018 using Novichok. We were able to identify the two suspects as DRU officers using leaked information from the Russian bureaucratic state.

Russia is so hopelessly corrupt that everyone in the bureaucracy is trying to make a bit of money on the side and they do that by selling data. We were able to access things like passport data, phone records that allowed us to identify, not only the real identity of two suspects, the two famous guys who were on Russia Today saying they were sports nutrition salesmen, but then that led us to more suspects who were involved with it. We linked them to another assassination using a nerve agent in Bulgaria, an attempted assassination of Emilian Gebrev, an arms dealer. That then allowed us to connect that group to basically a scientific research center in Russia, which was populated by scientists from the Russian chemical weapons program. And then when Alexei Navalny was poisoned, the Russian opposition leader, we checked the phone records of these guys and it happened they'd been in contact with an FSB team, Russian domestic intelligence, who'd been following Navalny for a couple of years, including on the day he was poisoned. And there was a lot of communication between them on the day he was poisoned.

And then that led us to multiple other cases where Russian opposition figures, activists, and just quite minor dissidents had been followed by the same team and fell mysteriously ill and, in some cases, died. So that in one sentence has been a two and a half year investigation that's still in ongoing. And we literally have a backlog of assassinations we have to investigate because we found so much evidence of this stuff going on.

Larry Bernstein:

What I find amazing is what you're doing with just volunteers and it is comparable to the government agencies, but you seem to be even better than they are with just volunteers. What is it about using a loose combination of volunteers and some simple approaches that makes you more competitive than state actors?

Eliot Higgins:

I think it's because we have access to as many people as want to be involved with what we are doing. A big part of what we're doing is we network with a range of different people in different ways. We have like a social media community. You can get involved and have ideas and suggestions. We connect to human rights organizations and lawyers and activists and NGOs. So we are able to draw on their experience, but also share our knowledge and experience with them. And I think because we're able to build these large networks that allows us to look at these issues, in a way from multiple angles with multiple viewpoints and experience, and basically just raw manpower to actually be able to do a lot of this work. Because a lot of it is just looking for needles in haystacks, but if you've got 500 people looking for a needle in one haystack, it makes life a lot easier.

Larry Bernstein:

Going back to your story about the missile firing that took down the Malaysian airliner over the Ukraine. One of the things I found very interesting was you were able to use this Russian soldier's social media as a source of information. In World War II, there was a famous poster that loose lips sink ships, and here, we've exponentially increased the exposure of loose lips. How do you think about how in the future armies are going to have to behave given that they can't really control or keep information quiet?

Eliot Higgins:

Well, the reaction from Russia maybe clues us into that a bit. After we had been doing this for a while and got more well known for doing it, Russia started putting out a lot of information posts to its soldiers saying, "Don't bring your mobile phones with you. Don't take photos of your activity." Then the State Duma in Russia passed a new law making it illegal for Russian soldiers to take any photographs or publish any photographs or videos of their service. And that would seem to be a direct response to what we'd been able to do.

One of the big clues we had with the missile launch through Russia were just ordinary people who saw this military convoy and thought, "Oh cool, I'll film this and put it on social media." And we were able to find that and then piece together the whole roots. So it's a hard one for them to address. And the thing is, tanks and planes and stuff are interesting and people are

always going to take photographs of them. I think it's really down to militaries to, if they want to counter this, they really have to educate people.

Larry Bernstein:

I had a book club a few years back with Seymour Hersh and he discussed in his autobiography called, The Reporter, about what it's like to be an investigative journalist, but he acted as like a lone wolf. And you're sort of like the opposite. You're using, as you said, 500 people to go investigate matters. What Hersh said was that he had real difficulty acting as an investigative reporter within normal journalism. They were unwilling to make long term investments in evaluating or investigating certain situations, just like the amount of time that you put into some of these projects. How do you think about the future of investigative journalism or is it even journalism? How do you think about the future of investigations?

Eliot Higgins:

Well, I've actually encountered Seymour Hersh as work in relation to chemical weapons, attacking Syria and his work actually fueled a lot of conspiracy theories about these attacks. For example, on the August 21st attack, in 2013, where over a thousand people were killed, he wrote a very lengthy piece explaining how actually it was, I believe it was a Turkish supplying chemical weapons to Jihadis and he had this whole long piece. And it was absolute nonsense because you could see from the open source evidence that the munitions used had been used by the Syrian army forces before.

I think this idea of the lone wolf journalists being held back by his editors is it be something that Seymour Hersh should have maybe thought about a bit more carefully because certainly his work on Syria was an embarrassment because it was really trash, and he even had a supposed intercepted conversation between a US soldier and a US intelligence official, so it claimed, that read like badly translated Russian Tom Clancy fan fiction.

Looking at the future of journalism, certainly from our experience working with the likes of, for example, we have people now at the New York Times at the visual investigation team who are former Bellingcat members. We set up a team with the BBC who used open source investigation and collaborative networks to do really high quality, impactful, award winning journalism.

Larry Bernstein:

When I think about the founding principles of Bellingcat, which you haven't mentioned yet, which is identify, verify, and amplify, maybe with also a little bit of transparency throughout. Can you talk a little bit about the foundational principles that you have and why it leads to your success?

Eliot Higgins:

When I first started doing this, I was just some ordinary guy who had no background in journalism who just wanted to understand what these videos coming from Libya showed me. So I didn't want to put information out there that was untrue because that had no benefit to

me, because I'd just be lying to myself. And really the blog I started was more for me to have a way to write down these interesting things I was finding, always for my own interest, and then if the people wanted to read it, it was fine.

But I always knew the limits of my own knowledge, so I never tried to make grand announcements about a video. I'd say here's a video, it has this bomb in it, I've just gone through all these different sites and sources to piece together what this bomb is, and therefore, I think, based off all these links I've just shared with you and all the evidence I've just shared with you, this is what I think it is.

Because I did that all the time, it started a level of transparency, meant people reading that started building a kind of trust in what I was doing, because I was always trying to be very, very clear about how I went from point A to point B to point C, when often when you are seeing blogs looking at conflicts, they were making huge leaps of logic and going, well, they wanted to make the conclusion that America was bad or something like that, so they fit everything around that evidence. And I was just saying, this video shows this bomb.

Then we developed and matured as an organization as Bellingcat. It came up to this principles of identify, verify, and amplify. So we identify information as part of the investigation process, we then verify it through various analytical techniques, like geolocation and chronolocation, and that allows us to understand what we're looking at and the situation. And then we have this kind of amplification stage, and that's about getting it out there, getting people to see it, but it's not about always doing it the same way. I mean, with MH17 our research has been turned into articles on week by week, day by day, longer reports, submissions to the European Corp of Human Rights podcast, and maybe even a TV series in the future, but it's the same kind of verified information that we identified earlier, it's just we're using it to amplify it in different ways to different types of audiences.

That's kind of always been the principle of how we work at Bellingcat, and that transparency of our sources and where it comes from is very important. And even when we did the work on Russia, which involved using what we would call closed sources, stuff that's not always publicly available, we are very transparent about how we came around to finding it and trying to share the much of that as possible with the audience. And that led actually to, in the case of the Skripal poisoning and the Navalny case, to Russian news reports is actually using those same sources to look into it. I think maybe some of them are trying to catch us out, but then having to say, "Actually, we've just found exactly the same thing Bellingcat says exists," and kind of confirming our findings.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to expand a little bit on the amplify part. In your book, you mentioned your very heavy use of Twitter. Can you talk a little bit about how much you use it, how it gets the ideas out there, who's listening to it, how successful is it in terms of just getting information to a whole lot of people?

Eliot Higgins:

Well, early on, I mean, I was just kind of your average Twitter user with a blog. But these communities start to form around certain topics, and there were lots of people interested in what was happening in Syria and they'd share my work and they'd send me videos saying, "Hey, do you know what this is?" And and then I dig into it. And that became particularly useful around certain incidents, like the big chemical attacks, where, because of the kind of reputation I'd built for looking at this stuff really meticulously, everyone would send me any link related to this stuff.

By that point it wasn't even necessary for me to really search for stuff because people just found it for me and sent it over.

But what I found very important to do is you've, in a way, got to equip your side with useful information, because the other side of these counterfactual communities, who have endless blog posts and YouTube videos that will tell them they're right on coronavirus being Bill Gates' idea, or the earth being flat, or white helmets all being terrorists. And on the other side, unless they are equipped with that same level of information, it's very hard for them to actually make their point. And so it's not really about convincing those other people, but putting the information out there so anyone seeing those discussions doesn't just see one side with what appears to be all the information, and the other side kind of scrambling for bits and pieces.

Larry Bernstein:

Where do you see the future of Bellingcat going in terms of scaling up, expanding its mandate? What's your future?

Eliot Higgins:

A lot of our focus at the moment is split into three areas of justice and accountability, education, and tech development.

Education is very important because a big part of what we do is based on building networks. We literally train hundreds of journalists and activists every year to do this kind of work. We're now networking more with universities and local media collaborative, and working to train them how to do open-source investigations like we do so eventually they can take that over and do it themselves in their local area.

We're also then working a lot on justice and accountability. So there's been a lot of questions from bodies like the International Criminal Court about how open-source evidence can be used in those courts. And we've been doing a lot of work now working on things like investigating Saudi airstrikes in Yemen, using a process we've developed with lawyers that refines and improves the process we've used before, with the intent of that information then being able to be used in a courtroom. And we had quite a lot of success with that. We've had a mock trial on Yemen, with real lawyers and a real judge who went on to join the ICC, where we tested if whether open-source evidence can be submitted in court. Because that's still a question that needs to be answered and, fortunately, that was successful.

So we're going to continue building on that and trying to find more real-world examples where our investigative work has actually been used to bring people to account. And we've had

success in the past. There was a case in Cameroon of soldiers shooting two women and two children in a video that was shared on social media. In fact, our collaborative work with the BBC and Amnesty International ... Cameroon convicted those soldiers of those murders. So there is a way that this kind of work can have a real-world impact and bring accountability for terrible actions.

Larry Bernstein:

One of the great challenges that our society faces right now is to persuade the unvaccinated to get vaccinated. And you mentioned that there is this community out there that is harping on autism, and other problems and risks associated with the vaccine. How should NGOs and governments fight back against this sort of information that's out there, to persuade people that this is not the right way to go? How do you challenge communities online to try to get better at truth seeking?

Eliot Higgins:

I mean, it's really difficult because we've seen the reactions, what happened after the January 6th violence where QAnon was pushed off social media. But it basically pushes them off to the edges of the Internet. They don't go away; they just go somewhere else where they're less visible. And it might reduce the ability for people to be drawn into those communities, but those communities do still exist in different ways. I think with coronavirus, especially in the US, it's particularly dangerous. Because you not only have these fringe communities, but mainstream political figures who promote these ideas. And that's immensely dangerous.

If the media doesn't act responsibly in these cases, then you will have these problems occur time and time again. Because you're always going to have people who have fringe ideas, that are anti-science who will, especially in America, see that as a Democrat versus Republican thing. And for me, I think that's incredibly dangerous.

I think some people have suggested maybe we should just kick all these people off the Internet. That's just ridiculous. I like to think some of the work we've done with Bellingcat shows how you can engage with communities, rather than having people not trust the government and then go off and find other people who don't trust the government, and then just get really angry at the government about coronavirus or whatever it may be. Instead, you can get them engaged with communities where you say, "Okay, we think there's a problem, recognize there's a problem. What can we do about it in a positive way?"

Larry Bernstein:

I end each session with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about as it relates to the sleuthing business?

Eliot Higgins:

Some of the stuff we've achieved at Bellingcat is almost a miracle.

I mean, when I started doing this back in 2011, I was working in an admin and finance role for a company that housed asylum seekers and I just did this in my spare time. And because of

everything that's happened, we're now in a position where we're working with the International Criminal Court. We're getting people convicted for terrible crimes. We've helped police, for example, at Europol find victims of child abuse and find their abusers. And it's all part of being a community and actually seeing the positive aspects of the Internet, and really going after those positive aspects. And it's something you have to be proactive about. You can't just sit back and hope you join the right Facebook group; you have to get involved.

But one thing I have discovered is there are people who do that. There are people who make incredible contributions, literally saving children from being abused because they took the time to look into something when someone else didn't. So I think if we can live in that world, then maybe the Internet isn't all conspiracy theories and angry people.

Larry Bernstein:

Eliot, thank you so much.