The Bellingcat research collective: War propaganda masquerading as “citizen journalism”

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In its report, released last month, on the 2014 downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17, the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team (JIT) blamed Russia. The JIT, in which the authorities of the Netherlands, Australia, Belgium, Malaysia and Ukraine are collaborating, stated that the missile that downed the plane “was brought from the territory of the Russian Federation and, after launch, subsequently returned to the Russian Federation territory.”

The JIT noted, “[M]any journalists carried out their own investigations, as did research collectives like Bellingcat. This resulted in different scenarios and theories being raised, both in the media and on the Internet.”

The JIT report is cursory and based largely on Ukrainian sources. It does not provide definitive evidence to back up its conclusions, leaving unresolved the question of who shot down MH17.

This reference to Bellingcat, however, is significant. The speculative scenario sketched out by the JIT, utilizing animation, images, un-sourced mobile phone recordings and references to unavailable satellite and radar data, is almost identical to that advanced by Bellingcat.

The Bellingcat “research collective” is a web site established in July 2014 by Eliot Higgins. Originally from Leicester in the UK, Higgins is, as of February, a senior fellow in the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab and Future Europe Initiative.

The Atlantic Council is a leading US geopolitical strategy think tank, which last month published a document outlining advanced preparations underway for the United States to fight “major and deadly” wars between “great powers,” which will entail “heavy casualties” and “high levels of death and destruction.” The document, titled “The Future of the Army,” roots the likelihood of such a war in what it calls “Russia’s resurgence.”

Higgins is one of five authors of an Atlantic Council report released earlier this year, “Distract, Deceive, Destroy,” on Russia's role in Syria. The report concludes by calling for US missile strikes in Syria.

From 2012, Higgins maintained a blog, “Brown Moses,” which became notorious for its pro-imperialist coverage of the Syria conflict. Higgins trawled social media posts--primarily Facebook, Twitter and YouTube--for images and clips that purported to reveal the many types of both homemade and industrially manufactured weaponry in use in the bloodbath provoked by US imperialism.

Despite having no background in weapons analysis beyond that supposedly derived from computer gaming and, in Higgins’ own words, “what I'd learned from Arnold Schwarzenegger and Rambo [films],” he was quickly identified by the international media as a ready source of quotes that could be palmed off as “independent,” while hewing to the anti-Russian line of the US and its NATO allies.

In 2013, Brown Moses became embroiled in allegations by the main imperialist powers that the Syrian government used chemical weapons against civilians in the Ghouta suburb of Damascus. By “studying” social media posts of damaged rockets embedded in the ground, the angle of shadows cast and satellite images of the area, Higgins claimed to be able to show that rockets, alleged to contain sarin, had been fired by the Syrian army.

Higgins' efforts were recycled by the world media. At the time, the US government and NATO were on the brink of a major military escalation in Syria, with the alleged chemical attacks meant to provide the pretext.

Later that year, veteran US investigative journalist Seymour Hersh debunked the chemical attack allegations, pointing out that numerous forces in the Syrian conflict, including US-backed “rebel” groups fighting the Syrian government, such as the Al Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front, had “mastered the mechanics of creating sarin and [were] capable of manufacturing it in quantity.”

Higgins’ work was rubbished by a group of Massachusetts Institute of Technology scientists, led by Professor Theodore

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Postol, a professor of science, technology, and international security. Postol told *Mint Press*, "It's clear and unambiguous this munition could not have come from Syrian government-controlled areas as the White House claimed." Higgins, he added, "has done a very nice job collecting information on a website. As far as his analysis, it's so lacking any analytical foundation, it's clear he has no idea what he's talking about."

By 2014, Higgins was able to raise the finance to create Bellingcat, a more professionally produced web site backed by up to 15 staff and volunteers. Bellingcat was launched days before MH17 was shot down and quickly expanded its area of study to include Ukraine.

How closely allied to the operations of the US state and intelligence network Higgins was by this time can be gauged from an article he wrote in July of this year, "New generation of digital detectives fight to keep Russia honest."

In the article on MH17 published on the Atlantic Council web site, Higgins wrote that following the downing of the plane, "With renewed interest in the conflict in Ukraine, Bellingcat began to look at other aspects of the conflict, where claims of Russian involvement were met with blanket denials." He continued, " *Together with our colleagues at the Atlantic Council*, we explored Russia's involvement in the conflict in Ukraine in the report 'Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin's War in Ukraine,' which led VICE News to track down one of the Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine who had been identified in the report." [Emphasis added]

The 2014 civil war in Ukraine, which included the Russian annexation of Crimea, was triggered by the far-right US- and EU-backed coup in Kiev earlier that year. It brought Russia and the US closer to a military conflict than at any time since the end of the Cold War, and served to transform Ukraine into a platform from which provocations and operations could be launched against Russia.

MH17 was shot down over territory controlled by Russian-backed separatists but contested by the Ukrainian government and far-right Ukrainian militias. From the first moment, prior to any investigation, the crash was seized upon by the US and its allies to denounce Russia as the world's main aggressor and isolate the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Proving that MH17 was shot down by Russian forces was a major focus of Bellingcat's efforts. As early as July 28, 2014, Higgins wrote, "The Buk That Could--An Open Source Odyssey," which was based on poor quality videos, stills and quotes from Ukrainian counterterrorism chief Vitaly Nayda. Citing communications intercepts he would not release, Nayda claimed that the "launcher rolled into Ukraine across the Russian border aboard a flatbed truck."

In contrast with Bellingcat's hack work, a 2015 report by the Dutch Safety Board into the MH17 crash is a sober piece of work. The Dutch investigators concluded that the most likely missile was a Buk of the 9M38 series with a 9N314M warhead. The investigators identified the potential launch site, based on a 320 square kilometre area, but made no attempt to further define the location or draw conclusions as to who controlled it.

By 2015, Higgins' propaganda operation had become so discredited that the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* was forced to apologise for its uncritical recycling of Bellingcat allegations that the Russian Defense Ministry manipulated satellite image data to support its position on MH17. According to Jens Kreise, an expert in digital image forensics, Bellingcat's technique of "error correction analysis" was "subjective and not based entirely on science." He added, "This is why there is not a single scientific paper that addresses it." Kreise went on to describe Bellingcat's work as "nothing more than reading tea leaves."

Immediately after the JIT's MH17 report was released, Higgins took part in an online Atlantic Council panel discussion. Commenting on Higgins' work, VICE journalist Simon Ostrovsky noted that Bellingcat gave "a view into the evidence that we wouldn't have understood otherwise... imagine if there hadn't been that narrative and the lies that were being produced by the Russian MoD [Ministry of Defence] had a fertile soil in which to grow, in which there wasn't this very public counterweight."

In other words, Higgins/Bellingcat is useful for pumping out propaganda masquerading as "citizen journalism." The so-called "research collective" is an Internet and social media adjunct of the US government and NATO. The conclusions of its "research" are determined by Higgins' politics, which serve the interests of the imperialist powers as they gear up for war against Russia.

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