Episode #225
Bellingcat & The Rise of The Citizen Detective
4th Jan, 2022

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge, and this is our first episode of 2022, so firstly, Happy New Year.

[00:00:29] I hope that 2022 will be filled with good news, curious learning, and some fun progress with your English.

[00:00:37] We are going to start off this year by talking about Bellingcat and The Rise of The Citizen Detective.

[00:00:45] It's a story of mystery, of **decentralisation**[1], of Russian spies, of a

democratisation[2] of intelligence, of what happens when you put a lot of

problem-solvers together, and of the magic of technological progress.

[00:01:01] We have a lot to talk about, so let's not waste a minute.

[00:01:07] When you think of what a detective, an investigative reporter or someone

working for the intelligence services does, you might think of different types of people.

[00:01:19] Perhaps you might think of the spies of the Cold War, using fake passports

and speaking perfect **unaccented**[3] foreign languages, **seducing**[4] people with their

charm[5] to get information, or sitting in their cars with a pair of **binoculars**[6] waiting to

spot[7] someone coming out of a building.

[00:01:40] Or perhaps you are imagining a more high-tech world, you might be

imagining a large room with lots of people wearing **security badges**[8] sitting in front of

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[1] the transfer of control of an activity or organisation to several local offices or authorities

[2] the introduction of a system that involves everyone

[3] not characterised by any particular accent

[4] attracting

[5] the power of being very pleasant and attractive

[6] an instrument with a special glass for each eye, used for viewing distant objects.

[7] see or locate someone's position

[8] small pieces of metal used as marks and worn to identify a member of a security group

computers, perhaps there is a huge screen on the wall with satellite imagery that is zooming in on a remote piece of desert or **woodland**[9].

[00:02:02] Something you probably aren't imagining is someone who looks just like me or you, sitting on their sofa in their pyjamas with their laptop, a cup of tea and a biscuit next to them while the TV is on in the background and their children are running around the kitchen table.

[00:02:20] But the reality is that this third category of detective, the citizen detective or citizen journalist, is one that has been **enabled**[10] by recent technology, and is **taking the intelligence world by storm**[11].

[00:02:37] One such person who falls perfectly into this third category is a man called Eliot Higgins.

[00:02:46] He had **tried his hand**[12] at a career in traditional journalism, but never quite made it.

[00:02:53] He had been working a series of administrative jobs, and it was during the civil war in Libya, in 2011, that he started to develop an interest in solving news-related problems on the internet.

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[9] woods or forest

[10] made possible

[11]quickly becoming very popular among people who are involved with collecting secret information

[12] tried to do it for the first time

[00:03:10] In 2011, the iPhone had been out for 4 years. Mobile phone ownership was growing fast all over the world, as was mobile internet, and with it, social networks.

[00:03:23] Anyone could take a picture or video, upload it to the internet, and create news. Of course, there were still plenty of traditional journalists covering the **conflict**[13] in Libya, but it was hard for them to **keep up**[14].

[00:03:40] Anyone could upload a picture to Twitter with a **caption**[15] of what it was, and suddenly that became "information", it became "news".

[00:03:52] With this came the power for **misinformation**[16], both from governments and individual actors.

[00:04:00] A picture could be uploaded with a **caption**, some text claiming that this was what the picture represented. This could be used to **confuse**[17] the enemy or to make people abroad believe something that wasn't true.

[00:04:16] Higgins was a competitive person by nature, and he became super interested in trying to discover the truth behind pictures that had been uploaded by soldiers fighting in the Libyan civil war.

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[13] fight, war

[14] move at the same rate, be as fast

[15] a short piece of text under a picture

[16] wrong information

[17] make them less able to understand what was going on

[00:04:31] When a **rebel**[18] soldier uploaded a video of a town that he said had recently been captured from government forces, how could Higgins check whether this was true?

[00:04:44] Well, by 2011 there was plenty of freely available technology that allowed anyone to investigate this **from the comfort of**[19] their own home.

[00:04:54] And this is exactly what Higgins started to do.

[00:04:58] He used satellite software such as Google Earth, he would look for information hidden within the photo to try to understand more about it, he would use any publicly available information to try to find the truth.

[00:05:15] He started out by **engaging**[20] with people on the comment section of the British Guardian newspaper, but before long he started a blog, and then his own company, a non-profit called Bellingcat.

[00:05:30] It started out as a **niche**[21], small hobby project, but within a few years Bellingcat became a **household name**[22] in the intelligence community, and is an

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[18] someone who had taken arms against or had resisted authority

[19] while enjoying the comfort or ease of

[20] getting involved, interacting

[21] concerning few people

[22] something very well known

organisation that has been **referenced**[23] by the CIA, by the British Intelligence Services, and has even been **labelled**[24] a "**foreign agent**[25]" by Russia, for reasons that will become clear in a minute.

[00:05:57] **Along the way**[26] Bellingcat has transformed the way in which intelligence is **gathered**[27], allowing and encouraging anyone, anywhere, yes even me and you, to **get involved**[28] in finding the truth.

[00:06:12] Higgins' and Bellingcat's first major success was in relation to the Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, the aeroplane which was **shot down**[29] over Ukraine on its way from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur.

[00:06:27] To briefly remind you of what happened, on 17th July 2014, which was actually only two days after the Bellingcat website went live, this passenger aeroplane was **shot down** over Eastern Ukraine, killing all 283 passengers and 15 members of the crew.

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[23] mentioned, spoken of

[24] described or identified as

[25] a spy for a foreign country

[26] during that time

[27] collected

[28] take part

[29] brought down after being shot at

[00:06:49] **The finger was quickly pointed**[30] at Russian-backed **rebels**[31] in Eastern Ukraine. It's believed that they thought they had shot a Ukrainian military plane, but accidentally shot a Malaysian plane.

[00:07:03] Although it was strongly suspected that this attack was made possible with Russian state support, it was hard to prove, and it was also hard to prove exactly who had shot the plane down and with what type of **missile**[32].

[00:07:19] Higgins got to work, and through a series of images he managed to **track down**[33] on social media he found a video of a **missile** launcher travelling through Russia in a military **convoy**[34], then he found another video of it in Ukraine returning to Russia with one **missile** missing from it.

[00:07:41] **Bingo**[35].

[00:07:42] Higgins had managed, **from the comfort of** his home in England and completely on his own, what none of the multi-million dollar intelligence agencies in Europe and the United States had managed.

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[30] the blame was quickly put on, they quickly thought to be the ones responsible for the action

[31] people who had taken arms against or had resisted authority

[32] a flying weapon, a rocket

[33] find after a difficult search

[34] group of vehicles

[35] used to express satisfaction after a successful try

[00:07:57] And the successes continued.

[00:07:59] Bellingcat **exposed**[36] the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons during the Syrian war, and the use of **drones**[37] to kill civilians.

[00:08:09] And Higgins was not afraid to **shine a light**[38] on the actions of Western governments as well.

[00:08:17] On March 16, 2017, a bomb was dropped on a mosque in Aleppo, Syria, killing over 50 people who were there for the evening prayer.

[00:08:29] Most posts on social media and news stories **blamed**[39] the Syrian government or Russia, but after **trawling through**[40] images and videos of the event, of satellite imagery and of thousands of other images of similar attacks, Bellingcat provided very **compelling**[41] evidence that it was actually the Pentagon, the US military that was responsible for the attack.

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[36] made visible, revealed

[37] aircrafts that do not have a pilot but are controlled by someone on the ground

[38] help people explain or understand

[39] thought they were responsible for the action

[40] searching very carefully through

[41] very interesting

[00:08:58] The biggest **scoop**[42] **to date**[43], the biggest success story for Bellingcat, was **still to come**[44].

[00:09:04] On 4th March 2018, Sergei Skripal, a former Russian secret service agent, and his daughter Yulia, were poisoned with the **nerve-agent**[45] Novichok, while living in the otherwise very **sleepy**[46] English town of Salisbury.

[00:09:23] Skripal had been a **double-agent**[47] for the British, he had been passing information to the British secret service in the 1990s, and had spent six years in Russian prison before being allowed to move to the UK, where he lived a very quiet life.

[00:09:41] When Skripal and his daughter were poisoned, **the finger was immediately pointed at**[48] Russia, and really, to the man at the top, Vladimir Putin.

[00:09:51] The poison was quickly identified as Novichok, a poison developed in Russia in the 1980s, and one that was known to be used by the GRU, the Russian secret service agency.

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[42] exclusive news story

[43] until now

[44] to happen or be achieved at a later time

[45] a poison that affects the nerves

[46] quiet, without much activity

[47] a person pretending to work as a spy for one government while actually working as a spy for another government

[48] the blame was immediately put on, they immediately thought to be the ones responsible for the action

[00:10:06] It's almost as if Putin wanted to make this very clear that this was a **state-sponsored**[49] murder and it wouldn't have been the first time.

[00:10:16] Another Russian ex-secret service agent, Alexander Litvinenko, had been poisoned with **polonium**[50] in 2006.

[00:10:26] Litvinenko had become an enemy of the Russian state, and had **fled**[51] to London **in a bid to**[52] stay alive. But, he was murdered, poisoned, and in fact died in the hospital next to my former university, University College London.

[00:10:43] With the poisoning of Litvinenko and of Skripal it's believed that Putin wanted to send a message to any other Russian secret service agent that was thinking of **betraying**[53] their country that you couldn't hide - eventually you would be found and murdered.

[00:11:01] Skripal and his daughter were **rushed**[54] to hospital, but unlike Litvinenko, they recovered.

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[49] paid or supported by the government

[50] a chemical poison

[51] ran away from danger

[52] in an attempt to, trying to

[53] showing disloyalty, being unfaithful by giving information to foreigners

[54] moved very quickly to

[00:11:08] Of course, this was a major diplomatic incident. There was an attempted double murder on British **soil**[55], and a foreign state was thought to be responsible.

[00:11:20] In August of that year, after **all diplomatic avenues had been exhausted**[56], the then British Prime Minister, Theresa May, published the faces and names of the two men that British Intelligence forces believed had **carried out**[57] the attack: Ruslan Boshirov and Alexander Petrov, but saying that it was believed that these names were **pseudonyms**[58], that they weren't their real names.

[00:11:48] With the photos and names of these two men now publicly available, Bellingcat got to work.

[00:11:56] The Bellingcat team had by then expanded dramatically, and consisted of both full-time employees and **volunteers**[59], people like me or you armed only with an internet connection and desire to **seek**[60] the truth.

[00:12:12] They had the images of the two men, so they had a **broad**[61] age range. This meant they must have attended military school during a particular period, and would

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[55] ground

[56] nothing more could be done in a diplomatic way or by conversation

[57] performed, put into effect

[58] not their real names

[59] people who helped them willingly and without being paid

[60] try to find

[61] very wide

likely have trained in Siberia. Bellingcat went through databases of graduates of military schools, looked through photos, **yearbooks**[62], and called up other students to ask for information.

[00:12:38] They also managed to buy a **black-market**[63] database of Russian passport information - copies of which are reportedly pretty easy and cheap to find online.

[00:12:50] They managed to find a **match**[64] - they found a man named Colonel Anatoliy Chepiga, whose photo directly matched the photo of the man **spotted**[65] in Salisbury.

[00:13:02] Shortly after they managed to track down the other man from sources as varied as a car insurance database. They identified him as Dr. Alexander Yevgeniyevich Mishkin, and they knew they were onto something when they called up ex-classmates of Mishkin's who revealed that they had been contacted by Russian authorities and instructed not to reveal any information about him.

[00:13:30] Both Mishkin and Chepiga were GRU agents, and they were a perfect match for the attempted murderers.

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[62] a book containing photographs of a class in a school and details of activities in the previous year

[63] a system in which something is sold and bought illegally

[64] a person who resembled or looked the same as him

[65] seen or located

[00:13:38] Again, Bellingcat and its team of **amateurs**[66] and **volunteers** had managed to do what the multi-million pound British intelligence services hadn't.

[00:13:49] A slightly **comic turn**[67] in this story is that, despite being **caught red handed** [68], Mishkin and Chepiga, still using their **pseudonyms** of Ruslan Boshirov and Alexander Petrov, were interviewed by Russian state TV, where they claimed that they were friends in the fitness industry who had travelled directly to Salisbury from Moscow to in order to visit the cathedral and its famous 123 metre spire.

[00:14:18] They weren't very good **assassins**[69], but they were even worse actors.

[00:14:23] The Skripal **saga**[70] was a real **turning point**[71] for Bellingcat, and for the citizen journalism movement.

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[66] people who were involved without being paid, non professionals

[67] funny development or change in the situation

[68] caught while they were in the act of doing something wrong

[69] people who murder someone for political reasons

[70] a long adventurous story

[71] the time at which things started to change

[00:14:30] When Bellingcat first started it was **looked down on**[72] as a group of **eccentric** [73] **hobbyists**[74], people who liked problem-solving and were **harmless**[75], but weren't really going to have any impact on the way information gathering was done.

[00:14:47] After the successes with the Malaysian airline, the Syrian civil war, multiple other smaller successes and now catching the Russian state **engaging** in attempted murder on foreign **soil**, the power of the citizen detective was clear for all to see.

[00:15:05] And since 2011, since Eliot Higgins decided to take an interest in the Civil War, numerous technological advances have made the life of the citizen detective much easier.

[00:15:18] For starters, every single day, more and more information is shared online.

[00:15:24] From photos, videos, hacked databases, social media posts, the more information that's available online, the more evidence that is for the citizen detective.

[00:15:36] Bellingcat actually publicly releases a **step-by-step**[76] account of exactly how it goes through evidence, and it's fascinating. I'd definitely recommend you reading it - it's all available on their website, bellingcat.com, and there are some excellent

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[72] thought to be unimportant

[73] strange or unusual

[74] people who were doing it as a hobby or in their free time for pleasure

[75] not able or likely to cause harm or damage

[76] by degrees, one step at a time

resources for how you can take part, if that's the sort of thing that sounds interesting to you.

[00:16:01] For example, if an original image file is available, there is lots of information that can come attached with it, such as the date and time the image was taken, the location, and the device it was taken on.

[00:16:16] Google Maps and Google Street View are both excellent resources, of course, and when combined with Google Earth and other satellite imagery this allows citizen detectives to **accurately**[77] locate where events have taken place.

[00:16:32] Social media posts will also be **timestamped**[78], and some will also have location data, meaning it's easy to find out where and when an event happened.

[00:16:43] Bellingcat also uses more complicated techniques, large **datasets**[79] and **algorithms**[80] to **trawl through**[81] public data and try to **seek** the truth.

[00:16:54] And as a result, it is now one of the first resources that intelligence services **turn to**[82], it has received multiple awards, and as of the time of recording it had a

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[77] correctly, exactly

[78] having the time they were taken recorded or shown

[79] collections of related sets of information

[80] sets of mathematical instructions that make it possible for computers to find answers to problems

[81] search very carefully through

[82] look to for information, consult

full-time team of 18 full-time employees and more than 30 **contributors**[83] in over 20 different countries, and thousands more **volunteers** who help **comb through**[84] publicly available information and try to **expose**[85] the truth.

[00:17:22] While it might be popular in the West, there's one country in particular, or at least the government of one country, where Bellingcat does not have many friends.

[00:17:32] And that's Russia.

[00:17:34] Indeed, in October of 2021 Bellingcat was **labelled** a "**foreign agent**" by the Russian government.

[00:17:42] The Russian government believes, or at least has publicly **accused**[86], Bellingcat of being the information warfare department of MI6, of the British Intelligence Services, and said that it is a way for the West to publicly distance itself from its information-gathering activities while **exposing dirt**[87] on and embarrassing Russia.

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[83] people who help by providing information

[84] search through carefully

[85] make it known, reveal

[86] said to have done something wrong

[87] revealing secrets they didn't want people to know about or making them known

[00:18:07] Now, of course that would be an **explosive**[88] theory, but there seems to be little truth to it. Bellingcat continues to **expose** crimes and injustices committed by countries all over the world, including the US and its allies, and Russia is certainly not the only **target**[89] of its investigations.

[00:18:28] It's certainly **convenient**[90], though.

[00:18:30] While UK or US intelligence services are often **cautious**[91] about revealing what they know, because their enemies will be able to investigate how they found out, if Bellingcat comes out and says something, and explains how it discovered this through public information, then that's hugely **advantageous**[92] for the "official" secret service **divisions**[93].

[00:18:56] What's more, Bellingcat has shown that it's prepared to use techniques that government departments, at least officially, are not. As part of the Skripal investigation Bellingcat bought **black-market** passport data, and it isn't afraid to do things that would get a government in a lot of trouble if it were caught.

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[88] having a great effect

[89] one selected as the aim or subject

[90] suitable or right for their purposes

[91] very careful

[92] beneficial, producing a favorable result

[93] major sections or parts

[00:19:19] The example of the citizen detective is a one that is only **poised**[94] to become more common in the coming years.

[00:19:27] Much like it doesn't take a huge film studio and equipment to make a video that's put on YouTube and seen by hundreds of millions of people, or like anyone can start a blog or a podcast that reaches people all over the world, similarly the power of a group of **decentralised**[95] curious researchers, all armed with a curious mind, a laptop, and some time on their hands can be just as effective, and in some cases more effective, than the highest paid, most qualified and most experienced intelligence officers in the world.

[00:20:05] OK then, that is it for today's episode on Bellingcat and The Rise of The Citizen Detective.

[00:20:12] I hope it's been an interesting one, that you've learnt something new, and that perhaps this episode might have inspired you to take up the challenge and try to **crack**[96] some of these internet puzzles yourself.

[00:20:25] If you are the kind of person who enjoys problem solving, then there are some great resources on the Bellingcat website - fun games like where you are given a

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[94] ready

[95] not belonging to a centre of control

[96] find a solution to

photo, just a photo, with no more information and you have to try to figure out where

exactly in the world it was taken.

[00:20:43] **Give it a go**[97] and let me know **how you get on**[98].

[00:20:46] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:20:50] What do you think about the rise of the citizen journalist? What does it mean

for the intelligence services? And is it something that you think would be fun to **get**

involved in[99]?

[00:21:01] I would love to know, so let's get this discussion started.

[00:21:05] The place for that is our community forum, which is at

community.leonardoenglish.com.

[00:21:11] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo

English.

[00:21:16] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

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[97] try it

[98] how you are advancing or progressing

[99] take part in

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Decentralisation	the transfer of control of an activity or organisation to several local offices or authorities
Democratisation	the introduction of a system that involves everyone
Unaccented	not characterised by any particular accent
Seducing	attracting
Charm	the power of being very pleasant and attractive
Binoculars	an instrument with a special glass for each eye, used for viewing distant objects.
Spot	see or locate someone's position
Security badges	small pieces of metal used as marks and worn to identify a member of a security group
Woodland	woods or forest
Enabled	made possible
Taking the intelligence world by storm	quickly becoming very popular among people who

	are involved with collecting secret information
Tried his hand	tried to do it for the first time
Conflict	fight, war
Keep up	move at the same rate, be as fast
Caption	a short piece of text under a picture
Misinformation	wrong information
Confuse	make them less able to understand what was going on
Rebel	someone who had taken arms against or had resisted authority
From the comfort of	while enjoying the comfort or ease of
Engaging	getting involved, interacting
Niche	concerning few people
Household name	something very well known
Referenced	mentioned, spoken of
Labelled	described or identified as

Foreign agent	a spy for a foreign country
Along the way	during that time
Gathered	collected
Get involved	take part
Shot down	brought down after being shot at
Fhe finger was quickly pointed	the blame was quickly put on, they quickly thought to be the ones responsible for the action
Rebels	people who had taken arms against or had resisted authority
Missile	a flying weapon, a rocket
Track down	find after a difficult search
Convoy	group of vehicles
Bingo	used to express satisfaction after a successful try
Exposed	made visible, revealed
Drones	aircrafts that do not have a pilot but are controlled by someone on the ground

Shine a light	help people explain or understand
Blamed	thought they were responsible for the action
Trawling through	searching very carefully through
Compelling	very interesting
Scoop	exclusive news story
To date	until now
Still to come	to happen or be achieved at a later time
Nerve-agent	a poison that affects the nerves
Sleepy	quiet, without much activity
Double-agent	A person pretending to work as a spy for one government while actually working as a spy for another government
The finger was immediately pointed at	the blame was immediately put on, they immediately thought to be the ones responsible for the action
State-sponsored	paid or supported by the government
Polonium	a chemical poison

Fled	ran away from danger
In a bid to	in an attempt to, trying to
Betraying	showing disloyalty, being unfaithful by giving information to foreigners
Rushed	moved very quickly to
Soil	ground
All diplomatic avenues had been exhausted	nothing more could be done in a diplomatic way or by conversation
Carried out	performed, put into effect
Pseudonyms	not their real names
Volunteers	people who helped them willingly and without being paid
Seek	try to find
Broad	very wide
Yearbooks	a book containing photographs of a class in a school and details of activities in the previous year
Black-market	a system in which something is sold and bought

	illegally
Match	a person who resembled or looked the same as him
Spotted	seen or located
Amateurs	people who were involved without being paid, non professionals
Comic turn	funny development or change in the situation
Caught red handed	caught while they were in the act of doing something wrong
Assassins	people who murder someone for political reasons
Saga	a long adventurous story
Turning point	the time at which things started to change
Looked down on	thought to be unimportant
Eccentric	strange or unusual
Hobbyists	people who were doing it as a hobby or in their free time for pleasure
Harmless	not able or likely to cause harm or damage

Step-by-step	by degrees, one step at a time
Accurately	correctly, exactly
Timestamped	having the time they were taken recorded or shown
Datasets	collections of related sets of information
Algorithms	sets of mathematical instructions that make it possible for computers to find answers to problems
Trawl through	search very carefully through
Turn to	look to for information, consult
Contributors	people who help by providing information
Comb through	search through carefully
Expose	make it known, reveal
Accused	said to have done something wrong
Exposing dirt	revealing secrets they didn't want people to know about or making them known
Explosive	having a great effect
Target	one selected as the aim or subject

Convenient   suitable or right for their purposes

Cautious   very careful

Advantageous   beneficial, producing a favorable result

Divisions   major sections or parts

Poised   ready

Decentralised   not belonging to a centre of control

Crack   find a solution to

Give it a go   try it

How you get on   how you are advancing or progressing

Get involved in   take part in

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com