



BELLINGCAT

TRUTH IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD

A SUBMARINE PRODUCTION IN coproduction WITH VPRO A FILM BY HANS POOL WRITTEN, DIRECTED AND CAMERA HANS POOL PRODUCERS FEMKE WOLTING AND BRUNO FELIX EXECUTIVE PRODUCER NICK FRASER EDITOR SIMON BARKER MUSIC BINKBEATS SOUND RECORDER, DESIGN AND MIX PEPIJN ABEN RESEARCH SASHA OURIKH, YULA ALITCHOULER MOTION GRAPHICS AND VFX CHRISTIAAN DE ROOIJ ANIMATION FONS SCHIEDON LINE PRODUCER JULIA TON COMMISSIONING EDITOR VPRO BARBARA TRUYEN WITH THE SUPPORT OF NPO FUND, NETHERLANDS FILM PRODUCTION INCENTIVE, COBO AND DOC SOCIETY CIRCLE © 2018 SUBMARINE/VPRO

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TRUTH IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD

A FILM BY HANS POOL

THE NETHERLANDS • 2018 • 88 MINUTES

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LOGLINE

BELLINGCAT – TRUTH IN A **POST-TRUTH** WORLD verkent de belofte van open bronnenonderzoek en geeft de kijkers een uniek kijkje in de exclusieve wereld van de ‘burgeronderzoekende journalist’, beter bekend als Bellingcat. Van de MH17 ramp tot de vergiftiging van een Russische spion uit het Verenigd Koninkrijk, de zoektocht naar waarheid van het bellingcatteam zal de strijd voor journalistieke integriteit belichten in een tijdperk van fake nieuws en alternatieve feiten.





SYNOPSIS

BELLINGCAT – TRUTH IN A **POST-TRUTH** WORLD volgt de revolutionaire opkomst van de ‘burgerjournalistiek’, beter bekend als Bellingcat: een groep van toegewijde online onderzoekers die ernaar streven de waarheid van ondoorgrondelijke nieuwsverhalen van over de hele wereld bloot te leggen – van de MH17 ramp tot de Syrische burgeroorlog, tot de mysterieuze vergiftiging van een Russische spion uit het Verenigd Koninkrijk. Vanuit zijn thuisbasis in Leicester bevragen Bellingcatleider Elliot en zijn team van waarheidszoekers kranten, netwerken en overheden.

Door middel van modern digitale technieken en crowdsourcing creëert Bellingcat een snellere en meer innovatieve benadering dan traditionele onderzoeksjournalistiek. Voor de eerste keer geven Bellingcat onderzoekers uit Duitsland, Nederland, Finland en de Verenigde Staten filmmaker Hans Pool exclusieve toegang om hen te volgen. Zij demonstreren de macht van open bronnenonderzoek en nemen de kijker mee in hun zoektocht naar de waarheid.

Bellingcats impact wordt bestudeerd door de lens van huidige onderzoeken, evenals de opvallende conflicten waar zij eerder melding over maakten. Met een opmerkelijke hoeveelheid grensverleggend onderzoek heeft Bellingcat drie jaar na oprichting al de reputatie verkregen baanbrekend onderzoek te genereren. Voor de eerste keer in de geschiedenis zetten, enkel op sociale media gebaseerde, aantijgingen van Bellingcat de International Criminal Court aan een arrestatiebevel uit te vaardigen. Afgelopen jaar werd het Nederlandse Bellingcat lid Christiaan Triebert beloond met de European Press Prize voor innovatieve journalistiek. Hij kreeg deze prijs naar aanleiding van zijn baanbrekende verslaglegging van de gefaalde Turkse coup.

Wat drijft Bellingcat in een wereld waar propaganda verhuld wordt als waarheid? Met overheden die minder betrouwbaar worden en traditionele kranten die aan relevantie verliezen – hoe lukt het Bellingcat, door sommige critici afgedaan als een sortering van kapitaalvormende “armchair researchers”, machtige wereldleiders naar het gerechtshof te krijgen waar zij aansprakelijk worden gesteld voor hun misdaden? Wat zegt hun succes over de verandering van de wereld aangaande de hedendaagse paradigmawisselende ontwikkelingen in overheid, technologie en sociale media?

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR HANS POOL

What inspired you to make this documentary? Why did you feel like this was a story you needed to tell?

It all started when I read an article about the findings of the Dutch Bellingcat member Daniel Romein in the Volkskrant [Dutch newspaper]. I wondered how it was possible that a citizen did this much all by himself. It was the first time I started to think about making a film about this subject. Initially I thought the main topic of the film would be the research on the MH17 case. But after I spoke to the members of Bellingcat I realized that the online association was doing research on so much more than just MH17. Cases ranging from crimes in Syria to the Skripal poisoning case, Bellingcat was doing research on pretty much any topic you can think of. These days the truth seems harder to find with governments growing less reliable, but these guys never stop until they expose the truth and are able to substantiate it with proof.

Additionally, I'm really interested in the developments of the internet, the role it takes in our society, and the way we interact with it. These days you don't need to be a journalist to do your own research. The only thing you need is a computer and an Internet connection. I come from an era without internet but I'm intrigued by the open source investigative methodology of Bellingcat.

At first glance, citizen journalism and open source research doesn't necessarily seem fit for a visual medium. What drove you to bring this topic to the screen – and how do you make it visual?

The topic of this film is an eye-catcher: every citizen, and by extension the viewer as well, is able to interfere in important cases that are played out on a world level. But the main subjects of my film were, at first glance, not so visually interesting: six boring fathers and their computers. How do I ever make this exciting for the viewer? That was a question that I struggled a lot with, even my colleagues wondered how I would turn this into something worth watching on the big screen. It was certainly a difficult task to make the topic visual.



Right from the start I knew that I wanted to avoid the "and then and then" narrative. In this film, I want to take the viewer with me, make them participants in the Bellingcat journey for truth as the case unfolds itself in front of the camera. You have to realize that Bellingcat's methodology costs a lot of time and sometimes the research they are doing leads to them to a dead end.

I try to reduce the research of their case, which in real time can take a substantial amount of time, to a fascinating narration of about three minutes.

And not to forget; in the documentary I also filmed Jay Rosen and Claire Wardle, who are able to put things into an academic perspective. Now the film is about the world we live in now and not just about five strange men sitting in front of their computers.

Was this a new way of working for you?

In 2013, together with five other directors, I worked on the Dutch documentary series 5 Dagen in mei. In the episode Helden zonder glorie, which centers around the battle of the Grebbeberg, my subjects were six old men, who were around 95 years old. I remembered I struggled with similar issues as with Bellingcat; I need to make something live in the minds of the viewer that is in fact as dead as mutton. In Helden zonder Glorie, I let the subjects talk about what happened during the battle. The viewer is transported, with the old soldiers, back to the battle while they search for their memories and relive what has happened during those days.

As a result of your documentary's research, do you believe that citizen journalism will overtake traditional journalism?

Technology gives power to the people and ensures the shifting character of journalism. That is not a recent phenomenon. These days everybody has a chance to produce a prizewinning photo since everybody has a camera with them in their phone. This has resulted in more unemployed photographers. In fact we may recognize a similar shift in investigative journalism.

It is harder to get your research financed, especially when it is time-consuming and might possibly be a dead-end. Bellingcat journalists are working on their research, sometimes until the early hours of the morning. A journalist who works this many hours on a case and then finds a dead-end is unpayable.

Nevertheless, I don't believe that traditional journalism will be replaced by citizen journalism. In the film we already see a trend where journalism and Bellingcat collaborate and coexist. Christiaan Triebert, one of the characters from the film, now works for The New York Times.

How did the research process change your feelings about Bellingcat and their open source investigation? Do you think Bellingcat is an optimistic force for the future?

I am absolutely in awe of the Bellingcat members. When I get home, I like to put on some music and drink a glass of wine. I'm certainly not working on a research. I have a very healthy respect for these guys who strive to expose the truth of news stories around the world.

Hans Pool (The Netherlands, 1962) is an award-winning director and cinematographer, who combines a journalistic approach with intellectual depth. He masterfully conveys topics that are difficult to grasp with a cinematic language that is understood by all. Previous films include Putin's Olympic Dream and Looking for an Icon.

INTERVIEW WITH BELLINGCAT FOUNDER ELIOT HIGGINS

What inspired you to start your first investigation? Is there a specific moment from your past that ignited your passion for finding the truth?

It was really a simple thing, trying to confirm if a video from Libya was filmed where it was claimed to have been filmed back in 2011. At that time there was an increasing amount of information about the conflict in Libya coming through social media, and lots of debate about what was authentic. The vast majority of bloggers using that content seemed more interested in conspiracy theories and making bold claims on thin evidence, and I wanted to produce something that was transparent and verifiable, especially when the main stream media seemed unsure what to do with this material themselves.



Do you distrust traditional media - or has your distrust increased lately? What does that say about the times we live in?

"Traditional media" is a pretty broad category, and there's certainly terrible examples of reporting in organizations within that category. For example, the Mail Online, which has published stories based on unverified claims that turn out to be completely untrue, like their story on an ISIS sex slave market video, which turned out to be a recreation from a documentary film.

There's also incredibly partisan reporting, probably the best known example being Fox News in the US. However, there's also some really great reporting being done by a lot of news organizations, and we're now seeing an increasing number of news organizations using open source information and analysis in their own work, like the New York Times and BBC.

There are many impenetrable news stories from around the world. How does Bellingcat select the topics for investigation?

When we first launched MH17 really dominated the news, and there was a vast amount of open source information and interest from the online community. As we investigated that we found more information about Russia's involvement in Ukraine, which led to a lot of additional reporting that didn't involve MH17. Then Russia began to bomb Syria in late 2015, and Syria was a topic I had written about since 2012, so the two

topics we were most interested in at the time came together. Most of Bellingcat's contributors were volunteers earlier on, so they wrote about what interested them, rather than being directed, but now we're able to employ staff we're focusing more on particular topics.

Currently our priority is developing open source investigation in relation to justice and accountability, from raising awareness of war crimes and human rights violations, to working with international bodies examining issues around using open source evidence and investigation techniques in their own work. As a result, we're focusing on Syria, Yemen, and Libya for a significant amount of our work. We're also working on developing projects with a local focus, working with local journalists, activists, and citizens on issues that affect their lives directly.

Where do you start your investigation in a massive influx of information? Is each case different or is there a "method" to the madness?

It varies a lot, with Syria you actually have a pretty limited number of sources, so it's somewhat easier, even in heavily covered events like the Khan Sheikhou Sarin attack in 2017. With Ukraine there's a lot more social media use, so it's more like looking for needles in haystacks, but with experience you figure out the most likely places to find useful information, and start there.

How do you qualify whether conflicting information is truthful when all the information is publicly available?

Often it's a case of explaining how certain things are true based on the available information, looking at how different sources corroborate each other, and verifying as

many of those sources as possible using other materials, such as satellite imagery. Usually if there's two conflicting versions of events it becomes clear very quickly who is lying.

In the film Christiaan Triebert, a member of Bellingcat, opens up that for him Bellingcat feels as a family. This conflicts with the image of a lone citizen journalist doing his research on his own. How do you see yourself and the relationship between the Bellingcat team?

The open source investigation community is actually pretty close knit, and most people know each other, either by reputation or through working together, so the idea that we're lone figures is pretty inaccurate. Collaboration is really key to the kind of work we do, and it's something we encourage at all levels.

Sometimes citizen journalism and traditional journalism are presented in opposition to one another. Do you think that these different forms of journalism are two extremes?

I find citizen journalism is an ill-defined term that's applied to Bellingcat because we're difficult to describe as an organization. I don't think what we do is opposite to traditional forms of journalism, but in fact complementary.

What do you think is your personal ideal vision for the future of journalism?

I'd like to see more collaboration between different kinds of organizations, and fields of research and investigation, as well as a growing number of practitioners, both from journalistic backgrounds and non-journalistic backgrounds.

THE CHARACTERS

Eliot Higgins (UK) - the visionary

British Eliot was busy investigating the civil war in Libya when, the day before Kaddafi was murdered, when his daughter was born. While at home with his infant daughter, he set up a blog in 2012 calling out the Syrian and Libyan regimes for their war crimes. From there, as they say, "The rest is history."

Timmi Allen (GER) - the visual artist

Berlin based Timmi is a geo-location specialist and graphic designer. While caring for his disabled daughter he started volunteering in the MH17 investigation.

Veli-Pekka Kivimäki (FI) – the military specialist

From his countryside home close to Turku (Finland). Veli-Pekka shares his military knowledge with the rest of the collective. He learned this trade during his mandatory service, when he was a sergeant responsible for the purchase of anti-aircraft firearms.

Aric Toler (USA) - Russia vs the world expert

Aric Toler left his work as an intelligence specialist to jump into an adventure called Bellingcat. From his hometown Charlottes his focuses are on verification of Russian media, the conflict in eastern Ukraine, Russian influence in the American/European far right and the ongoing investigation into MH17.

Hadi Al-Khatib (SY)

Founding member of the The Syrian Archive. He works on security and protection of human right defenders.

Christiaan Triebert (NL) - the adventurer / social media specialist

The Dutch twenty-six year old Christiaan Triebert won the European Press Prize – Innovation Award 2017 for revealing the online communication between the perpetrators of the Turkish coup.

ABOUT THE PRODUCERS

FEMKE WOLTING - Producent/Regisseur

Femke Wolting is, samen met Bruno Felix, oprichter en directeur van het onafhankelijke film- en transmedia productiebedrijf Submarine, een onafhankelijk film en transmedia productiebedrijf in Amsterdam en LA. Femke heeft prijswinnende documentaires geproduceerd, zoals *Meet the Fokkens*, en internationale animatieseries gedistribueerd zoals Mattel's *The Wellie Wishers* voor Amazon. Ze produceerde Peter Greenaway's laatste feature film, *Eisenstein in Guanajuato*, die tijdens het Berlinale Film Festival in première ging en recentelijk produceerde zij Brian Knappenberg's veelbesproken film *Nobody Speak: Hulk Hogan, Gawker and the trials of a free press* in première ging op Sundance 2017. De film beleefde een wereldwijde première als Netflix Original in 2017. Recentelijk produceerde ze *American Jail*, een film van Oscar winnende regisseur Roger Ross Williams, voor CCN en BBC. Sinds 1999 heeft Femke Wolting documentaires geregisseerd zoals *It's The End Of TV As We Know It*, een feature documentaire over de toekomst van televisie; de award winnende film *Sneakers* – over de opkomst van sportschoenen en Viktor & Rolf: "Because We Are Worth It, die een jaar in het leven van avant-garde fashion designers Viktor en Rolf volgt. Ze won een Emmy voor *Last Hijack*, een film die ze produceerde en co-regisseerde met Tommy Pallotta. De film beleefde zijn première op het Berlinale Film Festival 2014.



BRUNO FELIX - Producent

Bruno Felix richtte samen met Femke Wolting in 2000 Submarine op, een onafhankelijk film en transmedia productiebedrijf in Amsterdam en LA. Submarine is geroemd om een oeuvre van prijswinnende producties, gecreëerd in samenwerking met een uitgebreid netwerk van internationale creatievelingen. Bruno Felix onderzoekt de grenzen van visuele cultuur met projecten die nieuwe vormen van storytelling ontdekken, zoals de baanbrekende geanimeerde documentaire *My Second Life*, of de transmedia ervaring *Collapsus*. Hij heeft gewerkt met befaamde regisseurs zoals Douglas Gayeton, Tommy Pallotta en Peter Greenaway. Eerder was Bruno verantwoordelijk voor de ontwikkeling van een nieuwe media strategie voor VPRO en hij was Director of VPRO Digital, een media onderzoekslab dat de invloed van digitale technologie op productie en consumptie van diverse mediaformats onderzoekt.

IN SAMENWERKING MET

Doc Society Circle

Doc Society Circle, voormalig bekend als Britdoc is opgezet om grote documentaire producties in staat te stellen een wereldwijd publiek te bereiken. Door de jaren heen hebben zij meer dan honderd films gesteund, waaronder Shadow World en Citizen Four.

Omroep | VPRO

De VPRO produceert en zendt programma's, documentaires en films uit. De doelgroep van de VPRO bestaat uit hoogopgeleiden en creatievelingen (bijvoorbeeld artiesten, ontwerpers en wetenschappers). De VPRO werkt vaak samen met andere Europese broadcasters, zoals WDR, the BBC, and Arte.

Distributeur | Periscoop Film

Benelux distributeur Periscoop Film is opgezet om internationale documentaires, animatiefilms en genrefilms te releases. In de afgelopen twee jaar hebben zij onder andere de distributie verzorgd omtrent de release van Oscar genomineerde Life Animated, het prijswinnende The Wolfpack, en een van hun laatste releases is de Oscar genomineerde City of Ghosts van Matthew Helderman.

CREDITS

Submarine Amsterdam presenteert in coproductie met de VPRO

Een film van Hans Pool

BELLINGCAT - TRUTH IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD

Scenario, regie & camera
Hans Pool

Producenten
Femke Wolting
Bruno Felix

Geluid
Pepijn Aben

Montage
Simon Barker

Research & redactie
Sasha Ourikh
Yula Altchouler

Muziek
Frank Wienk (Binkbeats)

Submarine

Submarine is een productiebedrijf gevestigd in Amsterdam en Los Angeles gespecialiseerd in dramaseries, documentaires, animatie en transmedia projecten, zoals Peter Greenaway's Eisenstein in Guanajuato en de Emmy Award winnende documentaire Last Hijack. In 2017 produceerde Submarine Brian Knappenberger's geprezen film Nobody Speak: Trials of the Free Press, die in première ging tijdens Sundance en als Netflix Original werd gepubliceerd. Recentelijk produceerde Submarine in samenwerking met de Oscar-winnende regisseur Roger Ross Williams de documentaire American Jail voor CNN en BBC over het gevangenissysteem in Amerika, en More Human Than Human, een documentaire over de opkomst van Artificial Intelligence and de impact daarvan op de samenleving. Submarine werkt op dit moment o.a. aan animatieserie Undone, een coproductie met Tornante US, een Amazon Original serie van de maker en showrunners van Bojack Horseman.