



# BELLINGCAT

de waarheid is niet meer één

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, YVLA ALTHOULER 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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# BELLINGCAT

## TRUTH IN A **POST-TRUTH** WORLD

A FILM BY HANS POOL

THE NETHERLANDS • 2018 • 88 MINUTES

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The background image is a composite. The top half shows a soldier in full combat gear, including a helmet and camouflage uniform, standing next to the tail of a military aircraft. The bottom half shows a close-up of a person's fingers typing on a computer keyboard. The entire image has a dark, moody, and slightly desaturated aesthetic.

## LOGLINE

BELLINGCAT – TRUTH IN A **POST-TRUTH** WORLD explores the promise of open source investigation, taking viewers inside the exclusive world of the “citizen investigative journalist” collective known as Bellingcat. In cases ranging from the MH17 disaster to the poisoning of a Russian spy in the United Kingdom, the Bellingcat team’s quest for truth will shed light on the fight for journalistic integrity in the era of fake news and alternative facts.



## SYNOPSIS

BELLINGCAT – TRUTH IN A **POST-TRUTH** WORLD follows the revolutionary rise of the “citizen investigative journalist” collective known as Bellingcat, a group of online researchers dedicated to exposing the truth of impenetrable news stories from around the world – from the MH17 disaster to the Syrian Civil War to the mysterious poisoning of a Russian spy in the United Kingdom. From his Leicester home, de facto leader Eliot and his team of truth-seekers put newspapers, networks and governments to the test.

Bellingcat uses cutting-edge digital techniques and crowdsourcing to create a faster, more innovative approach than traditional research journalism. For the first time, Bellingcat researchers in Germany, the Netherlands, Finland and the United States have given exclusive access to filmmaker Hans Pool, allowing him to follow the group on their path to demonstrate the power of open source investigation.

Bellingcat’s impact is examined through the lens of their current investigations, as well as the high-profile conflicts they’ve previously reported. In the three years since its inception, Bellingcat has produced a remarkable amount of breaking news while gaining a reputation for trailblazing journalism. For the first time in history, Bellingcat’s efforts led the International Criminal Court to issue an arrest warrant solely based on social media evidence. Just last year, Dutch member Christiaan Triebert was awarded the European Press Prize for innovative journalism for his reporting on the failed Turkish coup.

In a web of propaganda disguised as truth, what drives Bellingcat forward? With governments growing less reliable by the day and traditional newspapers declining in both relevance and reach – how does Bellingcat, dismissed by some critics as an assortment of self-funded “armchair researchers”, have the ability to force powerful world leaders to the international courts where they are held accountable for their crimes? What does their success say about how our world has changed in the face of this century’s paradigm shifting developments in government, technology and social 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 every 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.

**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.

#### Biography of Hans Pool:

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 Russian 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 Sheikhoun Sarin attack in 2017. With Ukraine there's a lot more social media use, so it 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 you are something is 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 were 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."

## 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.

## 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.

## Hadi Al-Khatib (SY)

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

## 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.

## 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 - Director/Producer

Femke Wolting, together with Bruno Felix, is the founder and managing director of Submarine. She has developed and produced numerous documentaries and series, including Peter Greenaway's feature Eisenstein in Guanajuato and the Emmy Award-winning documentary Last Hijack. In 2017, Femke produced Brian Knappenberg's acclaimed film Nobody Speak: Trials of the Free Press, which premiered at Sundance and was acquired as a Netflix Original. Most recently, Femke has produced Oscar-winning director Roger Ross Williams' film American Jail for CNN and the BBC about the prison-industrial complex, and More Human Than Human, a documentary exploring the rise of artificial intelligence and its impact on humanity. She is also currently producing Undone, an upcoming Amazon Original series from the creator and showrunners of Bojack Horseman, as well as Ponies, a thriller/drama series financed by (amongst others) Avrotros and Studio Canal.



## BRUNO FELIX - Producer

Bruno Felix co-founded Submarine, one of the leading transmedia production companies from the Netherlands, with Femke Wolting in 2000. Spanning film, animation, non-fiction and interactive genres, Submarine boasts a roster of award-winning productions created in collaboration with an extensive network of international creatives. Bruno Felix seeks to push the boundaries of visual culture with projects that exploit new forms of storytelling, such as the ground-breaking animated documentary MySecond Life or the transmedia experience Collapsus. He has worked with renowned directors such as Douglas Gayeton, Tommy Pallotta and Peter Greenaway. Previously, Bruno was responsible for developing a new media strategy for Dutch Public broadcaster VPRO and was Director of VPRO Digital, a media research lab exploring the influence of digital technology on production and consumption of diverse media formats.

# CREDITS

Submarine Amsterdam presents in co-production with VPRO

A film by Hans Pool

BELLINGCAT – TRUTH IN A **POST-TRUTH** WORLD

**Written, directed & camera by**

Hans Pool

**Producers**

Femke Wolting

Bruno Felix

**Executive Producers**

Nick Fraser

**Sound**

Pepijn Aben

**Editing**

Simon Barker

**Research & editorial**

Sasha Ourikh

Yula Altchouler

**Music**

Frank Wienk (Binkbeats)

**Commission editor VPRO**

Barbara Truyen

# submarine

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