

# Juryrapport Machiavelliprijs 2019

**Bellingcat**

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MACHIAVELLI

'The number of potential suspects for taking down flight MH17 has been narrowed down to 20 Russian soldiers'. Dutch media reported this in January 2016.

Obviously, this was major news. And something you might expect from the official intelligence agencies. However, the source was a relatively unknown investigative collective of journalists named Bellingcat.

That in itself was news of equal importance. Working on their own, an organisation of volunteers had managed to uncover what the police and the law had been trying to find out for years.

It was a Dutch Bellingcat employee who identified Russia's 53rd Antiaircraft Missile Brigade. That unit was suspected to be responsible for transporting the BUK missile to Ukraine that was used in the attack on flight MH17. The same employee also identified the 20 soldiers who were suspected to be involved in attack.

In other words, without the means that the law has at its disposal, this investigative collective was able to track down the relevant suspects. Later on this was fully confirmed by the Joint Investigation Team, the JIT, the international investigation team under Dutch leadership responsible for investigating the attack. It was evidence strong enough to hold up in court according to the JIT.

Bellingcat's disclosures about MH17 had an impact all over the world. And in the Netherlands in particular.

The Bellingcat story could be a thrilling Netflix episode. British founder Elliot Higgins, once an unemployed gamer, discovered that one can conduct serious and thorough research with a laptop and an internet connection. Using public sources, and nothing else. Photos and videos that circulate on networks such as Facebook, data from Google Earth, Google Maps and more.

No deep throats, no classified documents, no dangerous trips in bulletproof vests to war zones or other means of classic journalism for Bellingcat.

On the contrary, Bellingcat takes a highly unorthodox approach. Based solely on public sources. Public sources that are thoroughly investigated by using a laptop and the internet. Accompanied by an unprecedented commitment, endurance and patience. It is precisely that combination that characterises the quality and uniqueness of Bellingcat's work.

Higgins first entered the public eye with information about the civil war in Syria. Other internet investigators joined him in the years that followed. Dutchman Christiaan Triebert was one of them. This journalist reconstructed the 2016 coup attempt in

Turkey for Bellingcat. A report that was circulated around the world. It earned Triebert a European press award and a job at the New York Times.

In recent years, Bellingcat's fame has risen with revelations about the attack on MH17 and the degree of Russian involvement in it. As well as with revelations about the poisoning of former Russian spy Skripal and his daughter in the UK. And with revelations about the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Turkey.

In the meantime, Bellingcat has grown into a journalistic collective that has established a unique position in the international media landscape. Bellingcat owes this unique position to its unique and innovative approach.

Bellingcat uses an innovative journalistic approach that results in ground-breaking revelations time and again. In the process, Bellingcat uses every public source that the digital age has to offer.

Bellingcat has given in-depth investigative journalism a quality boost in an era in which fake news is becoming increasingly prevalent. This innovation is a great example for traditional media as well as for students who aspire to become a journalist.

Bellingcat has set a new standard for good, in-depth and revealing investigative journalism that the regular media can no longer ignore. This innovation in investigative journalism has become an example to others.

Bellingcat's work also makes clear is that there is a tremendous need for this type of solid investigative journalism. Bellingcat's revelations – with respect to MH17 first and foremost – show that the regular media still have a long way to go.

Bellingcat demonstrates that, by using a new, innovative method, there are definitely opportunities for investigative journalism. Editorial staffs in the Netherlands and the rest of world are extending invitations to Bellingcat to brush up on their investigative techniques. That is a serious sign in an age of fake news. It is also an incentive for serious media to continue to invest in serious investigative journalism.

Whereas traditional media are often reluctant to share their research methods, Bellingcat encourages it. Bellingcat really deserves the highest praise for sharing its knowledge.

Not only with established journalists, but also with journalism students. Journalism schools are incorporating Bellingcat's investigative methods in their education.

It is also remarkable that Bellingcat has successfully organised a financing scheme all its own. This is accomplished not only by giving workshops and training, but also through crowd funding and sponsoring.

Now, with the opening of a Dutch office, Bellingcat is entering a new phase. Through this Dutch office, the organisation wants to assist the International Criminal Court here in The Hague, the ICC, in criminal cases with the use of open source material. That might be bad news for some suspects.

Over the course of the past five years, Bellingcat has put itself firmly on the map. With ground-breaking revelations, such as those involving MH17. Through an innovative way of practising journalism, based solely on excavation work in public sources. And by sharing its knowledge and methods.

Therefore it a great honour and a pleasure for the board of the Machiavelli Foundation to present the 2019 Machiavelli Award to Bellingcat and its founder Elliot Higgins.

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De Stichting Machiavelli zet zich in om discussie en activiteiten op het gebied van  
publieke communicatie te stimuleren.

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