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Discursive Warfare: Bellingcat Challenging Dominant Actors

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Abstract:

This article has examined how Bellingcat, as a contemporary digital social movement (DSM), challenges hegemonic discourses about global social injustices. Through a case study approach, this article has focused on the ensuing discursive warfare which surrounded the downing of commercial flight MH17 and Bellingcat's engagement in the discursive struggle, as portrayed in their podcast. The empirical material has been analysed through tools of Critical Discourse Analysis, a social movement studies perspective and the concept parrhesiastic sousveillance. Bellingcat's strengths as a DSM were found to be their alternative discourses and epistemology, and hybrid form of movement. The alternative discourses identified was the War of Words, New Cold War Discourses, Unveiling the Truth, and Seeking Support in Challenging Dominant Actors. Their alternative epistemology was found to allow for acts of parrhesiastic sousveillance, by providing awareness of discursive struggles entailed by social injustices, utilising open-source investigations and decentralised networks to produce alternative discourses and engage in parrhesiastic truth-saying. Bellingcat's hybrid form of movement combines both a centralised structure and decentralised networks. The article contributes to understanding the functions of DSMs and their impact on discursively challenging dominant actors about global social injustices.

Keywords: Alternative Epistemology, Bellingcat, Contemporary Digital Social Movement, Critical Discourse Analysis, Discursive Warfare, Parrhesiastic Sousveillance

Introduction

Bellingcat is a group of individuals who investigate crimes and injustices of powerful actors on a global scale – for example, right-wing extremist groups, militias, corporations, and governments – using *open-source intelligence* (OSINT) (e.g., Colborne, 2021, 2022; Donnelly, 2022; Godin, 2022; Gonzales, 2022; Huon, 2022; *Russia*, n.d.; Woroncow, 2022). They do so, using digital means to gather, compile, analyse, and disseminate intelligence from available open sources and crowdsourced information from the internet to report on crimes and injustices with the stated aim of increased transparency and accountability (*About - Bellingcat*, 2023; Bär et al., 2022; Ilyuk, 2019; Pendry, 2021). Bellingcat was founded by Eliot Higgins in 2014 and was first constituted by a group of volunteers who were self-taught in OSINT methodology, having previously made themselves a name under the pseudonym Brown Moses by exposing war crimes in the Syrian civil war on his blog using open sources (Bellingcat, 2019, 43:44; Keefe, 2013). Bellingcat only recently became more well-known to the wider public, particularly in connection to their high-impact investigations on the U.S. Capitol Riots in January 2021 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which increased their following base on social media heavily (Bär et al. 2022). However, Bellingcat's investigations about the downing of the Malaysian air flight MH17 over Ukraine in 2014 and the attempted murder of the Russian oppositional politician Alexei Navalny in 2020 also gained significant traction on social media and were reported by major international news outlets (Agence-France Presse, 2016; Bär et al., 2022; Higgins, 2014; Ilyuk, 2019; *MH17*, n.d.; 'MH17 Ukraine Disaster', 2016; *Navalny*, n.d.; Pendry, 2021; Schwirtz, 2020; Walker, 2021).

However, existing research on Bellingcat is limited and the majority of the existing research stems from the scholarly field of journalism, media, and communication (Bär et al. 2022; Ilyuk 2019). Further knowledge about Bellingcat and similar movements is thus called for. In this article I take a sociological perspective on Bellingcat, understood as a contemporary *digital social movement* (DSM), to explore and delineate its main means and attempts to challenge dominant discourses on the social justice issues it engages in.

Although Bellingcat often is depicted as a group of journalists, I argue that Bellingcat should be defined as a contemporary DSM, where this article focus on their means and attempts of opposing global social injustices and promoting change in power relations through collective action founded in shared beliefs through digital means (Della Porta, 1999; Laaksonen & Porttikivi, 2022; Melucci, 1989; Tufekci, 2014). As a DSM, Bellingcat utilises modern technology as means of promoting alternative narratives of social reality, challenging hegemonic discourses set by dominant actors, and advocating against social injustices, which Anderson (2022) and Garrido (2015) would define as forms of *sousveillance*.

As a DSM, Bellingcat has a hierarchical structure constituted by a board of directors, where Eliot Higgins is the chairman/executive director responsible for the daily management, and 18 full-time employees (mainly investigators and researchers) who are managed by a four-member team of which Eliot Higgins is in charge of (*About - Bellingcat*, 2023; *Meet Our Team*, n.d.). Bellingcat are financed through fees from workshops they provide and unconditional grants, i.e. they do not accept funding from any national government or funding which comes with conditions of not criticising any particular body (*About - Bellingcat*, 2023). When communicating and managing publicity about investigations, they do so almost exclusively online, mainly on the social media platform Twitter (Bär et al., 2022). Furthermore, Bellingcat's investigations are often conducted in a participatory manner by engaging with their audience

for information and fact-checking, as well as utilising unorthodox collaborations, thus utilising vast digital decentralised networks in their social justice struggles (Ilyuk, 2019; Pendry, 2021; Tufekci, 2014). Bellingcat also educates its audience about OSINT methodology through its transparent disclosures of their investigations as well as providing online and offline courses (e.g., *Bellingcat - YouTube*, n.d.; *Workshops Archive*, n.d.; Toler, 2023). As such, Bellingcat promotes *technopolitical agency*, which is vital for social movements to be able to achieve change in their social struggles in digital society (Higashida, 2022). By promoting OSINT engagement to their audience, they mobilise the movement by furthering engagement with the decentralised networks. Bellingcat's promotion of technopolitical agency therefore has a twofold purpose: to provide ordinary individuals with social justice tools to challenge dominant discourses and powerful actors' ability to set discursive agendas; and turning their audience into a part of their decentralised networks. This hybrid form of hierarchical structure and decentralised networks stands in contrast to DSMs which tend to be horizontalized and leaderless (Gray & Gordo, 2014; Higashida, 2022; Tufekci, 2014).

In their social justice struggle, Bellingcat engages in *sousveillance*, attempting to 'watch the watchers', i.e., monitor different types of authoritarian actors *from below* to hold them accountable (Mann, 2005; Mann et al., 2003). To understand Bellingcat's resistance to surveillance societies and authoritarianism, their actions should be related to the broader social antagonisms and power struggles that constitute the context. By understanding the politics of *sur/sousveillance* as an inherently societal struggle, we find social movements that oppose surveillance and authoritarianism by opposing social and global injustices, and point out that surveillance and authoritarianism result in many more societal problems than lack of personal integrity and privacy (Garrido, 2015; Jeffries, 2011). In this article, I approach Bellingcat as a DSM characterised by acts of *sousveillance*, i.e., conducting and publishing OSINT investigations and thereby increasing transparency to hold authoritarian regimes and other powerful actors accountable for their actions. This is essential in Bellingcat's struggle for global social justice.

Taken together, I situate Bellingcat within both a social movement and a *sousveillance* perspective, to study DSMs' means and attempts to challenge global societal injustices and hegemonic discourses. Thereby, I contribute to both the field of surveillance and *sousveillance* studies and that of social movement studies. My case study on Bellingcat provides knowledge on contemporary global social justice struggles through a contemporary DSM utilising an OSINT methodology in investigations as means of *sousveillance*, to hold powerful actors accountable and promote technopolitical agency. The objective of this article is to produce new knowledge about contemporary DSMs and how they challenge global actors. My research questions are: What are the strengths and main means of Bellingcat as a contemporary digital social movement? What alternative discourses and epistemologies does Bellingcat draw on to challenge dominant discourses and hold powerful actors accountable for their actions and deeds?

This article begins by providing an overview of previous research about Bellingcat and similar movements that conducts *sousveillance* or online activism. I then describe the theoretical points of departure, which include theories about social movements and *sousveillance*. Following, I account for my methodological considerations and choices. I then present Bellingcat as a critical case of contemporary DSMs, and a case of *parrhesiastic sousveillance*, a concept by which I argue contemporary DSMs are characterised. I thereafter provide the socio-political

and material context of the discursive struggle, followed by an outline of my findings in terms of the discursive struggle, including Bellingcat's truth claims. Finally, I discuss the socio-political and material consequences of discursive warfare and present a concluding discussion.

Contemporary Digital Social Movements: The Existing Research

Cooper & Mutsvauro (2021) studied Bellingcat's open-source methods in conflict reporting based on Bellingcat's investigations, social media activity, and interviews with members. They concluded that the use of OSINT and digital tools to investigate and verify stories were effective methods that seriously challenged traditional journalistic methods. Müller & Wiik (2021) conducted a study about Bellingcat and other similar open-source actors¹ from a journalistic view through interviews with key informants. They aimed to investigate how open-source actors' methodology influenced investigative journalism and found that practices such as unorthodox collaborations, crowdsourcing, transparency, and the use of open sources have a growing importance in traditional journalism. Pendry (2021) studied Bellingcat's role within the journalistic landscape of human rights and war reporting through interviews, focusing on the use of OSINT and crowdsourcing. Pendry concluded that OSINT and crowdsourcing, enabled by modern technology, make it possible to investigate and verify news in areas that are difficult to access and that Bellingcat's transparent presentation of investigations lived up to quality standards such as objectivity and replicability. However, Pendry also points out that the same social media platforms that enable the spread of Bellingcat's investigations, mainly Twitter, simultaneously enable the spread of disinformation and propaganda. Ilyuk (2019) included 75 investigative articles and other material published by Bellingcat, focusing on the downing of MH17 to analyse the technological methods and narrative tactics of Bellingcat. Ilyuk found that Bellingcat used several different publicly available digital tools, publicly available information, and crowdsourcing in their investigations and presentations, and that their transparent and technically skilled investigations effectively provided credible information in a post-truth world. Bär et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study about Bellingcat, with the purpose to analyse Bellingcat's social media activities and how they utilise social media for crowdsourcing information and fact-checking. Bär et al. found that Twitter was Bellingcat's most popular platform with over 700,000 followers, and therefore analysed a sample of 24,682 tweets. They found a steady increase in engagement over time, most notably did it increase when Russia invaded Ukraine in the early spring of 2022. Bär et al. also studied what type of posts elicited engagement and found that posts with negative sentiment and/or containing visuals (e.g., photos, films) elicited more engagement from the public. Though the research presented above originates from the fields of journalism, media, and communication it is deemed relevant to my study since it provides knowledge about Bellingcat's means and how they present their investigations, which I aim to contribute to further by studying Bellingcat from a social movement and sousveillance perspective.

To my knowledge, there are no studies investigating Bellingcat or any similar DSM that conducts open-source investigations from a social movement and/or sousveillance perspective. However, Gutierrez (2023), studied Forensic Architecture (FA), an interdisciplinary research agency defined by Gutierrez as an organisation, through the perspectives of documentary studies and data activism, a concept related to social movement studies. Gutierrez found that FA provided counternarratives through meta-documentaries, exhibiting their investigations in which they utilised digital technologies such as open sources, and architectural techniques to

¹ Airwars, Forensic Architecture, and Syrian Archive.

investigate social injustices. Though FA is defined as an organisation and is constituted by scholars from different fields Gutierrez, like Bellingcat, contributes knowledge about using digital technology and counternarratives as a means of social change.

Examples of social movements similar to Bellingcat, in that they are defined as movements that engage in *sousveillance* using contemporary technology, can be found in Anderson (2022), Higashida (2022), and Simonson (2016). Anderson studied Cypherpunks, a form of digitalised and decentralised social movement. The study aimed to investigate their epistemologies which were found to be centred around online data activism against increasing digital surveillance, a form of *Cypherpunk sousveillance*, emphasised through their ideology of holding powerful actors accountable through transparency. Higashida conducted archival research of records and media on how social rights movements in the U.S. utilised contemporary technology, such as the radio, to perform *dark sousveillance*, a term which infers resistance to racialised surveillance through Black epistemologies of anti-surveillance, counter-surveillance, and other forms of freedom acts. Higashida found that technological literacy is crucial for social movements to be able to adapt modern technologies to be used in their social struggle, i.e., assert technopolitical agency. Simonson carried out an ethnographic study with elements of legal analysis when she studied social movements that conduct organised copwatching by patrolling their neighbourhood and utilising digital means such as cameras and smartphones to film interactions between police and citizens, which she argued to be a form of *sousveillance*. Simonson found that by conducting organised forms of *sousveillance*, police were held accountable, through counteracting asymmetrical power relations by providing real-time input into policing decisions.

My contribution to the existing knowledge accounted for above is constituted by Bellingcat being an example of a new type of contemporary DSM who utilises a hybrid form of movement, constituted by both a centralised structure and decentralised networks. Though previous research has acknowledged that Bellingcat utilises networks for crowdsourcing of information and fact-checking etc., it has not been acknowledged how Bellingcat strives to create engagement with their networks by promoting technopolitical agency, thus mobilising their networks as a part of the DSM. This hybrid form of movement also differs from other forms of social movement who conducts *sousveillance* accounted for above. Furthermore, this article is the first empirical study of Garrido's (2015) concept of parrhesiastic *sousveillance*, a concept which I argue DSMs are characterised by and thus, contribute to knowledge about parrhesiastic *sousveillance* and how it is practiced.

Digital Social Movements: Challenging Regimes of Truth

My theoretical points of departure rely on the concepts of social movements, more specifically the notion of digital social movements and *sousveillance*, and as regards the latter, parrhesiastic *sousveillance*.

For this article, I will study Bellingcat from a social movement perspective. Classical definitions of social movements can be found with Della Porta (1999) and Melucci (1989), who argues that social movements mainly are constituted by collective action and informal networks anchored in shared beliefs seeking to promote social change or oppose global injustices and alter power relations. The notion of social movements has further developed as technology has developed, where DSM now exist and can to varying degrees conduct their activities online: some movements utilise digital connectivity as a tool for communication, organisation and to

gain publicity (Tufekci, 2014); other exists and exerts their activism almost exclusively online (Gray & Gordo, 2014). DSMs are often horizontal, i.e., leaderless, instead they exert their activism in a participatory manner (Gray & Gordo, 2014). Though there are disadvantages to leaderless structures, it can lead to a lack of structure, accountability, and sustainability for the movement (Gray & Gordo, 2014; Higashida, 2022; Tufekci, 2014). However, DSMs also enable fluid forms of organisation (Laaksonen & Porttikivi, 2022).

To analyse Bellingcat as a DSM I will study their *collective identity*, defined as an interactive and shared sense of belonging and purpose within a group which is produced through *collective action frames* (Benford & Snow, 2000; Melucci, 1989). I will focus on how Bellingcat discursively produces its collective action frames and its means of achieving these goals. Collective action frames can be described as social movements' chosen sets of beliefs used to mobilise followers, gather support, and demobilise antagonists to achieve change. The three core framing tasks are *diagnostic framing*, identifying the problem; *prognostic framing*, deciding what actions should be taken to solve the problem; and *motivational framing*, motivating the masses to act according to the prognostic framing (Benford & Snow, 2000). The discursive process involves any discursive activity performed by a movement's members in the context of the movement's activities (Benford & Snow, 2000). In this case, I have analysed Bellingcat's discursive activity through its podcast.

As a DSM, Bellingcat engages in a form of sousveillance. The concept of sousveillance was first developed by Mann, Nolan, and Wellman (2003), who depicted it as the inversion of surveillance or as conducting "reflectionism" of surveillance practised by those above; where the intended aim is examining those in power and holding them accountable. Interestingly, Mann & Ferenbok (2013) notes that sousveillance is more dependent on modern technology than surveillance, and that sousveillance can become more effective in triggering political disruption and change by it being employed by large social networks with low-grade participants or small communities of active 'sousveillance officers' who conducts it through modern technology.

When suggesting that Bellingcat as a DSM is conducting sousveillance, it might not be the most orthodox use of the concept. However, I depart from Garrido's (2015, p. 4) notion of us living in a "global surveillance society" characterised by a global interconnection of polity and surveillance, which Garrido critiques Mann for not taking into account in his concept of sousveillance. In the global surveillance society, mass surveillance is motivated by a nexus of intelligence, culture, and economy, which is conducted by a state-corporate nexus through the emergence of a "neoliberal global government" – which motivates studies of not only sur/sousveillance but of the *political economy of surveillance*, defined as "the interconnection of social, economic, and political processes" (Garrido, 2015, p. 4). Garrido further argues that through mass surveillance, which entails control over the circulation of information and communication in global and digital societies, an information asymmetry is asserted which provides authority with power. More specifically, it enables *regimes of truths*, which discursively manufacture 'truths' that sustain the current system of power. Garrido, therefore, introduces the concept of *parrhesiastic sousveillance*, a merger of Mann's sousveillance concept, examining power from below, and Foucault's concept of parrhesia, which entails "courageously speaking the whole truth without reserves" (Garrido, 2015, p. 10) even when it may place the speaker in danger. Garrido argues that when sousveillance is conducted with political aims which contest authority and its regimes of truths, it should be understood as

parrhesiastic sousveillance. Parrhesiastic sousveillance, therefore, contests regimes of truths that attempt to sustain political, economic, and social control of society and its individuals. Parrhesiastic sousveillance entails breaking authorities' control of the information flow by counteracting one-sided information transactions through the provision of alternative information, thus counteracting the asymmetrical relation of information/power.

Through Bellingcat's investigations, they conduct parrhesiastic sousveillance since they are contesting truths manufactured to sustain current power systems by providing contesting information, thus disrupting authority's information flow. The information which is contested sometimes concerns social injustices that powerful actors merely wish to be perceived differently but are not directly involved in, and sometimes social injustices which directly involve those in power. This type of movement, which is conducting sousveillance with political aims of contesting regimes of truths, i.e., parrhesia, is a new type of movement according to Garrido (2015). Garrido also argues for the importance of utilising the internet in efforts of regaining control of the informational flow from authority. I further argue that parrhesiastic sousveillance is central to contemporary DSMs' activism, though it can be performed in different ways.

Research design

To investigate the new phenomena of contemporary DSMs that hold powerful actors accountable I have focused specifically on Bellingcat. In the contemporary global world, they are one of the most prolific such groups with several high-impact investigations. Therefore, I argue Bellingcat to be a *critical case* of DSMs, that represents the larger phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2014). There are several advantages to focusing on a single case. It enables an intensive study of Bellingcat's discursive activity over time and it allows me to contextualise the case (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Hence, I have studied Bellingcat as a DSM and their use of open-source intelligence in rich detail and situated Bellingcat and their activities in their historical and contemporary social context.

Furthermore, I have in this article studied the formation of a DSM by focusing on Bellingcat's first high-impact investigations, specifically on those about the downing of the commercial flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine in 2014 and its aftermath (Bär et al., 2022; Ilyuk, 2019). For this purpose, an embedded single-case design has been utilised, arguing that Bellingcat's investigations into MH17 and Russia's involvement in the downing are representative of the larger phenomenon of DSMs' activism, characterised by parrhesiastic sousveillance, and that it represents the creation of Bellingcat's collective identity since it was their first investigations as a movement (Podcast, 2019a, 2:50; Yin, 2014).

The main empirical material of this article has been a podcast produced by Bellingcat with Eliot Higgins as narrator, in collaboration with executive producer Max O'Brien and producer Robbie MacInnes, covering the many investigations of the downing of MH17 and its surrounding events, as well as the context in which the downing took place, over six episodes roughly 30 minutes each. This begs the question of who is represented in the podcast. Eliot Higgins, the founder of Bellingcat, is the predominant speaker, covering around half of the speaking time of the podcast, three Bellingcat investigators feature recurrently, as well as 23 different guest speakers who provide expert knowledge or are related to the victims. The podcast, I argue, is a summary representation of Bellingcat's *modus operandi*, where they present their investigations and collaborations with experts, as well as guests' investigations to

collectively form alternative discourses; where the collaborations exemplify how Bellingcat utilises decentralised networks in their investigations (Müller & Wiik, 2021; Pendry, 2021). This material has been complemented with episode guides that contain textual summaries of the episodes, links to the investigations the episodes are based on, and visual aids from their OISNT investigations.

All quotes are presented in their original form, meaning that grammatical errors are kept in the quotes as they were. The material was transcribed by hand and coded in NVivo using analytical tools of *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA).

I have utilised tools from CDA to analyse Bellingcat's discourses to study how they draw upon alternative discourses and epistemologies to challenge dominant actors since CDA allowed me to situate Bellingcat in their social practices; in this case, their socio-political and material context, further elaborated on in the sections The Context and Implications of the Discursive Warfare (Fairclough, 2013; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). The CDA perspective has been used in combination with the more actor-driven perspective of collective action frames to study how DSMs exert agency through acts of parrhesiastic sousveillance, enabling the examination of their acts of truth-saying situated within their social context (Benford & Snow, 2000). Further, epistemology has been defined as the theory of knowledge, and how knowledge is justified, and discourses, from a CDA perspective, can be "anything from historical monument ... a policy, a political strategy, narratives in a restricted broader sense of the term, text, talk, a speech, topic-related conversations, to language per se" (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 3).

I have approached Bellingcat's discourses by deconstructing them, to be able to understand what ideologies are exerted through them and be able to understand how power is exerted through their use of language, in line with CDA (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). As a contemporary DSM, Bellingcat conducts parrhesiastic sousveillance, which entails contesting dominant actors' informational control by providing alternative discourses. By analysing these alternative discourses through CDA I have been able to study the dialectic relation between social and discursive practices, i.e., how the socio-political and material context in which the downing of MH17 took place shaped Bellingcat's use of language and how Bellingcat contributed to language use about it. Further, in line with CDA, I have taken a *critical* approach to happenings in the world and the context in which Bellingcat is situated, while studying Bellingcat especially, to unveil structures of ideology and power (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Core analytical tools which have been employed when coding the material in NVivo and analysing it have been *discourse & genre* (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The former delineates specific discourses, which imply certain ways of using language which provides a specific meaning from a certain perspective, of which I have identified four specific alternative discourses: War of Words; New Cold War; Unveiling the Truth; and Seeking Support in Challenging Dominant Actors, used by Bellingcat to challenge powerful global actors. The latter delineates typical language choices which are connected to and constitute a specific social practice, where I have found that Bellingcat as a contemporary DSM is characterised by a parrhesiastic discourse genre, which constitutes both Bellingcat's ontology, by providing concepts and categories through which meaning is ascribed, and a part of their alternative epistemology. Other tools which have been used are *order of discourse* and *interdiscursivity* (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Order of discourse is in this case

constituted by the sum of discourses and genres performed by Bellingcat, the Russian discourses they are challenging, as well as those of experts which Bellingcat draws upon. Interdiscursivity has been utilised to analyse how Bellingcat's discourses are linked to and draw from other discourses, such as new and old Cold War discourses and victim-discourses. Other tools which have been utilised when coding and analysing how the discourses have been constructed have been: *metaphors* and *choice of words*, such as “the battle to control the narrative was in full flow” (Podcast, 2019a, 31:23); *modality* which describes the degree of certainness, which is vital to analyse how Bellingcat's parrhesiastic claims of truth are built; *transitivity*, how processes and events are connected by Bellingcat; *interactional control*, to be able to study the relationship between different speakers (Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

With the considerations stated above regarding the case study design, sampling, use of CDA and the theoretical points of departure of sousveillance and collective action framing, I argue that this article has a high degree of *construct validity*, i.e., that motivated and well-considered operational measures of investigating a DSMs' means and alternative discourses have been identified and applied (Yin, 2014). Further, regarding *reliability*, I hope to convince the reader with my interpretations through detailed descriptions of Bellingcat's discourses and examples provided through quotes (Yin, 2014). I further argue that this study's *external validity* also is high, in that my findings about Bellingcat can be analytically generalised to contemporary DSMs, as well as providing knowledge about parrhesiastic sousveillance functions, where the theoretical proposal consists of that all DSMs conduct parrhesiastic sousveillance through their activism (Yin, 2014).

There are limitations to the study, *intertextuality* has not been analysed, hence limiting the analysis of Bellingcat's discursive practices (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Limitations regarding the choice of an embedded single-case design would be that of lacking a comparative element between contemporary DSMs, though this aspect has been mitigated somewhat by drawing on previous research when discussing the empirical findings. Also, by focusing on a single-embedded case, understanding the movement as a whole might become lacking. Though the choice of material, six podcast episodes summarising several investigations conducted over several years, should provide a representative picture of Bellingcat's alternative discourses and means as a contemporary DSM.

Ethical considerations made in this article are mainly that of committing to social justice and disruption of hegemonic structures, in the vein of CDA, by investigating how DSMs challenge hegemonic discourses set by dominant actors (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). By investigating DSMs' means to challenge power structures and dominant actors' power abuse knowledge about it is created, knowledge which can be adopted by others who aim to do the same. Thus, spreading knowledge which could serve to democratise society by challenging hegemonic structures. However, there are risks that this type of knowledge also could be utilised as means to counteract DSMs. Further considerations regarding the choice of using publicised material, in this article a podcast, is that the producers instead of the researcher have control of the original material (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). However, since the aim of this article is to exploratorily and descriptively study Bellingcat's discourses and means, it is deemed fitting that the empiric material is produced by Bellingcat, and since the podcast is publicly available with the aim of reaching an audience, it is considered ethically acceptable to use as empirical material.

Result

In the following, I will first account for the socio-political and material context for the discursive war in terms of the Ukrainian civil war. I then proceed to delineate the discursive struggle, presenting Bellingcat's four main discourses: War of Words; New Cold War; Unveiling the Truth; and Seeking Support in Challenging Dominant Actors. Also, as will become clear, part of Bellingcat's main strengths are their alternative discourses and epistemology. I will then conclude the result with the socio-political and material implications of the discursive war.

The Context: Revolution and Counter-Revolution

Only 30 years ago, it [Ukraine] was the frontline of the Soviet Union. Now, are people increasingly looking westwards. (Podcast, 2019a, 4:34)

In this section, I will describe the socio-political and material context in which the downing of MH17 and the consequential discursive struggle took place.

A conflict was sparked in Ukraine by the Maidan protests in Kyiv in 2013, where Ukrainians protested the president's refusal to deepen ties with the European Union (EU), and attempts to strengthen Ukraine's relations with Russia (Podcast, 2019a, 4:34). After weeks of protests and violent clashes between pro-EU protesters and police, who represented the government and thus politicians who aimed to deepen ties with Russia, President Viktor Janukovytyj fled to Moscow seeking assistance from President Vladimir Putin (Podcast, 2019a, 6:00). What can be described as a revolution, or a coup had taken place in Ukraine.

However, there are also large groups of Russian-speaking Ukrainians, mainly in the eastern parts of Ukraine, who feared being cut off from their ethnic motherland Russia and becoming a persecuted minority; a pro-Russian counterrevolution was therefore established and the conflict was soon active (Podcast, 2019a, min. 6:00). Soon thereafter, unconfirmed reports of unbadged Russian soldiers, or so-called "little green men" (Podcast, 2019a, 6:38), directing operations began to surface. This was heavily denied by Putin himself who claimed that only local citizens were involved in the conflict on the pro-Russian side (Podcast, 2019e, 13:01).

Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, or MH17, was a commercial airline jet that took off from Amsterdam on July 17th 2014, with destination Kuala Lumpur (Veiligheid, 2019). Its flight path took it over a bisection of eastern Ukraine and its border towards Russia, a flight path which was regularly used at the time even though the ongoing conflict on the ground between Ukrainian military forces and Pro-Russian separatists (Podcast, 2019a, 10:00; Veiligheid, 2019). Contact with the plane was lost over eastern Ukraine about 50km from the Ukraine-Russian border, and the wreckage from the aircraft fell near Hrabove in the Donetsk Oblast about 40km from the border, an area which at that time was controlled by pro-Russian separatists. The reported death toll was 298 people (The Telegraph, 2014). As will be shown, the cause of the crash became the focus of a global discursive struggle.

War of Words: A Meta-Discourse

The War of Words ... has already begun. (Podcast, 2019a, 10:54)

In the following, the creation of Bellingcat's collective identity as a DSM will be accounted for by studying their first investigations as a movement, thereby also creating knowledge about functions in DSMs and contemporary global injustices. In Bellingcat's discourse War of Words, the discursive struggle about who was responsible for the downing of MH17 will be delineated through Bellingcat's meta-narration of it and as will be shown, the event of the downing was contested on a global scale. Eventually, divisions started to materialise, with a collective of global actors holding Russia accountable, which was highly contended by Russia and its allies. It is this discursive warfare that Bellingcat makes themselves part of, to unveil the truth and demand accountability.

Interestingly, Eliot Higgins used the expression "War of Words" to describe the discursive struggles which took place within the context of the material conflict in Ukraine, showing that Bellingcat as a movement is aware of the discursive struggle between global actors and that they contribute to it by entering it. Thereby, forming a collective identity as a DSM who is aware of not only material warfare but also discursive warfare by narrating and commenting on it in a meta-fashion, like a discourse analysis. By acknowledging and defining discursive warfare, Bellingcat creates an identity as a movement who are aware that global injustices entail not only material consequences but also discursive struggles about how they should be perceived. The downing of MH17 is inherently linked to the material military conflict about Ukraine's belonging to Russia in the East or the EU and thus Europe in the West, since the downing took place within this material conflict, and therefore, it is connected to its discursive struggles as well. Baines (2009, p. 1) states "The War of Words or discursive struggle tends to be particularly acrimonious following civil wars", a notion which could be argued to also fit the active civil war-like conflict in eastern Ukraine. A conflict between one side that "increasingly is looking westwards" (Podcast, 2019a, 4:34) and strived for integration with the West, and the other side whose leaders strived for not only deepened ties with Russia but were "pro-unification" (Podcast, 2019a, 8:34). The War of Words is therefore about both the conflict in Ukraine and the downing of MH17 since they are intrinsically linked materially and discursively, and regarding both the Ukrainian conflict and MH17 there were different versions presented by different sides.

It is within this material context that the discursive struggle took off that Bellingcat makes itself a part of. First, they intended to unveil the truth, and when they discovered that the Russian government was involved in the unlawful downing of MH17, they intended to hold them accountable by confronting them with the truth, "open-source investigative journalism allows us to hold these reckless and callous state actors to account" (Bellingcat, 2019, 43:44). Thereby creating a collective identity as a DSM who conducts parrhesia, and thus challenges dominant actors through truth-saying to hold them accountable. The notion of an ongoing discursive struggle is further denoted through expressions and metaphors such as "While we worked, the battle to control the narrative was in full flow, and this is where Bellingcat steps in" (Podcast, 2019a, 31:23), thereby utilising transitivity, connecting Bellingcat to the discursive warfare as an actor who aims to affect it.

Discourses suggesting that pro-Russian separatists were responsible for the downing of MH17 and that it likely was a surface-to-air missile that was used, were fairly quickly asserted in the West through media and politicians; some of them also indicated that a government could have supplied the missiles (e.g., Podcast, 2019b, 2:00; The Telegraph, 2014). These discourses have

been further asserted through official investigations such as the JIT² and unofficial investigations like those by Bellingcat. Furthermore, both the JIT and Bellingcat asserted that the Russian government had supplied the surface-to-air-missile as well as Russian military personnel who operated the missile system (MH17, n.d.; Veiligheid, 2019; Zaken, 2018). However, on a global scale, this was and is far from established. President Putin was quoted saying on the same day of the downing of MH17 that “There is no doubt that the country on whose territory this terrible tragedy happened bears responsibility” (The Telegraph, 2014) and in April 2014 he said “This is nonsense. There are no Russian armed forces anywhere in the east of Ukraine” (Podcast, 2019e, 12:54). Putin was again quoted regarding MH17 in a press conference 2019 saying “We find absolutely unacceptable what we saw and what was presented as evidence of Russia’s guilt. We think there is no evidence at all there” (Kremlin, 2019, para. 9), challenging discourses ascribing guilt to Russia by denying their involvement. As late as February 2023 the spokesperson of the Kremlin, Dmitry Peskov, was cited contesting new conclusions made by the JIT, which implied that Putin had been directly involved in approving the shipment of missiles to the separatists (Reuters, 2023), showing that the macro discursive struggle about MH17 still continuous.

Other examples of a global discursive struggle from the time of the downing could be seen in countries such as China, a country that had relatively deep ties to Russia at the time. Through their state news agency Xinhua China criticised the U.S. and Australia for being “rash” when blaming Russia, although otherwise mainly chose to remain quiet (Branigan, 2014; Chang, 2014). Another example of Russia’s guilt being challenged on a macro scale is heard in Bellingcat’s podcast, where Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, in 2019, was paraphrased by a news reporter at a symposium about the downing of MH17 organised by himself, “Mohammed said, ‘We are very unhappy because, from the very beginning, it was a political issue on how to accuse Russia of the wrongdoing’” (Bellingcat, 2019, 11:35). This quote is used by Bellingcat to exemplify and emphasise the ongoing macro-discursive struggle.

By having identified and connected the ongoing discursive war about the downing of MH17, the conflict in Ukraine, and Bellingcat’s investigations which concluded that the Russian government is responsible, Bellingcat articulates a diagnostic framing: the Russian government might avoid accountability for their deeds by contesting the truth in the discursive warfare. Thus, having identified a dominant actor who through their means manufacturers regimes of truths to sustain their current system of power. Bellingcat aims to counteract this by engaging in the discursive warfare as an actor, through parrhesiastic sousveillance, their prognostic framing, which entails examining and counteracting one-sided information transactions from dominant actors by providing alternative information, thus disrupting its means of setting discursive agendas. They, thereby, create a collective identity as a DSM characterised by parrhesiastic sousveillance, examining power and speaking truth to it, which is done through their means of OSINT investigations. Furthermore, the discursive meta-analysis of the discursive struggle is permeating the other three discourses, showing interdiscursivity between them. The meta-discursive analysis of the discursive warfare is also important for Bellingcat’s parrhesiastic discourse genre since it allows them to gain knowledge about the discourses that are used in discursive struggles, which they then can utilise in their social justice struggles when

² The Joint Investigation Team with representatives from the Dutch Public Prosecution Service and the Dutch police, along with police and criminal justice authorities from Australia, Belgium, Malaysia, and Ukraine to investigate the downing of MH17 (Zaken, 2018).

producing alternative truths, thus constituting a part of their alternative epistemology, which will be expanded upon further throughout the result.

New Cold War Discourses: Igniting an Old Discursive Struggle

Here I will show how Bellingcat portrays the actors within the discursive struggle, where they increasingly portray the War of Words as a conflict between West and East, thereby interdiscursively drawing from Cold War discourse and contributing to New Cold War discourses. Bellingcat's discourse suggests that Russia have imperialistic ambitions anchored in ethno-Russian nationalism, where they through disinformation contests and conceals the truth. Bellingcat opposes this by situating themselves as antagonists to Russia, by doing so they place themselves on the side of the truth and the West.

Bellingcat frames the macro discursive struggle about MH17 not only as a conflict between Ukraine, pro-Russian separatists and Russia, but increasingly as a conflict between West (Europe and the U.S.) and East (mainly Russia) through certain words and metaphors such as "Now rival narratives faced off across the old Cold War frontiers" (Podcast, 2019a, 30:23) and "The Great Powers faced off" (Podcast, 2019b, 02:00). Furthermore, by using metaphors, words, and references like these, Bellingcat connects the conflict, its actors, the downing of MH17, and the discursive struggle following it to the Cold War and its divisions through interdiscursivity. Thus, drawing on and contributing to the revitalisation of the 1940s-1990s Cold War discourses adapted into a contemporary context, namely *New Cold War* discourses.

The use of the term New Cold War in this article refers to the term proposed by Edward Lucas (2008a, 2008b), where he argues that Vladimir Putin and parts of the Russian elite merely have changed the ideological clash between Russia and the West, from a clash between Communism and Capitalism to now being between lawless Russian kleptocrats who are promoting ethno-Russian nationalism and imperialism and views the West and its multilateralism as their adversaries. By using this discourse and contributing to it, it suggests that Bellingcat to some degree shares Edward Lucas' views on contemporary Russia and the antagonism between Russia and West.

In the New Cold War discourse, contemporary Russia is often portrayed as an agitator with imperialistic ambitions, which has material consequences further adding and adhering to the New Cold War discourse.

After its annexation of Crimea in southern Ukraine, the Russians seem to have been afflicted by hubris and decided that they could push further... as a way of trying to leverage Kyiv. They wanted Ukraine to realise it was part of Russia's sphere of influence and couldn't break away. (Podcast, 2019a, 7:35)

Bellingcat also places itself on the same side as the West by opposing the imperialistic ambitions Russia has towards Ukraine, "genuine Russian nationalists who thought this was their mission to expand Russia's borders and protect Russian speakers in what they don't really think is a real country" (Podcast, 2019e, 2:43), and the way Bellingcat specifically opposes them is by conveying the truth in the discursive struggle.

When thousands of shards of flight MH17 rained down onto a field in eastern Ukraine, it ignited a war over the truth that has been raging for a full five years now. At Bellingcat we've been on one side of that war ... we've been fighting to reveal the lies of a powerful state actor. (Bellingcat, 2019, 1:07)

MH17, and implicitly its passengers, are portrayed as passive victims who simply happened to rain down on a field in Ukraine by accident. However, this seemingly insignificant event, as it would have been had it been a military plane that was shoot down, turned out to have major consequences, which Bellingcat denotes by using graphic metaphors focusing on the discursive struggle over the truth. In this contest of truth, a David and Goliath situation is implied, where Bellingcat is portrayed as the underdog who righteously challenge and abuse Russia and its enormous power, further implying that it is the weak ordinary people who are the victims of this power abuse. In the quote above, Bellingcat also attempts to illustrate what discourses the Russian regime uses in the War of Words. Russia is portrayed as actively trying to distort the truth where they “create as confused an information space as possible” by wanting “to bury the truth in as many different and seemingly random and often bizarre theories and conspiracies as possible, precisely to scramble the information space” (Podcast, 2019b, 02:34). This was done through disinformation campaigns on social media platforms, such as Twitter, among other tactics.

Twitter had also become the target of something more insidious. Hashtags like Kyiv shot Boeing down and Kyiv provocation exploded across social media. Thousands of them, literally thousands per hour, were being fed into Twitter from small and often oddly faceless accounts. (Podcast, 2019b, 4:10)

The disinformation campaign, which Bellingcat says can be traced to a “troll factory... said to be run by a close ally to Vladimir Putin” (Podcast, 2019b, 4:56) suggested that “the Ukrainians had fixed the Russians up for the crime” (Podcast, 2019b, 6:40). Though Russia had several more claims which they accounted for during a press conference held in a room “basically like the war room in Doctor Strangelove” (Podcast, 2019b, 7:32). All claims except one explicitly blamed Ukraine for the downing and several of them contradicted each other. The last claim was a specific denial “I would like to emphasise that the Russian Federation did not deliver to the rebels any anti-aircraft missile systems” (Podcast, 2019b, 25:56), which is exactly what Bellingcat later would claim they had done. Further, by referring to the satirical Cold War movie ‘Doctor Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb’³ in connection to the Russian claims, they are portrayed as baseless and even ridiculous.

³ A satirical comedy from 1964 about how a nuclear holocaust is triggered during the Cold War (Kubrick, 1964).

Russia is further portrayed as falsely making themselves out to be a victim, whereas the West (mainly the U.S. and Ukraine but also Europe) are made out to be the perpetrators and therefore their antagonists, e.g., “The Russian Federation once again finds itself the target of completely unfounded accusations intended to discredit it in the eyes of the international community” (Bellingcat, 2019, 13:58), which was how Kremlin responded to a letter from Bellingcat asking about their position on the JIT’s conclusions that the Russian regime was involved in the downing of MH17. In another statement by Kremlin’s translator, made at a press conference, Russia is intentionally creating divisions between West and East by directly accusing the West of making unfounded accusations, “Russia, we’re not playing these games that are Western counterparts is engaging in very much. Blaming someone and accusing some parties without any evidence“ (Podcast, 2019e, 31:53).

The discursive framing performed here by Bellingcat is to further portray Russian denial of involvement in the downing of MH17 as symptomatic behaviour by the regime. Through transitivity and interdiscursivity, drawing on old and new Cold War discourse, Bellingcat connect Russia to disinformation, troll farms, imperialistic ambitions, and ethno-Russian nationalism. By highlighting this, Bellingcat argues that this is an important issue which can have further global consequences. This discourse is therefore performing both a diagnostic and motivational framing by contextualising the identified problem, that contemporary Russia’s true nature is deceitful and dangerous, therefore motivating parrhesiastic sousveillance actions, i.e., holding them accountable by contesting their regimes of truths and displaying their true nature globally. Thereby is this discourse an important aspect of their parrhesiastic discourse genre since it serves to define an adversary, the dominant actor, which needs to be held accountable.

Unveiling the Truth: Speaking Truth to Power

It is heartening that the Internet provides us with the necessary tools to speak truth to power and reveal the current Russian regime for what it really is. (Bellingcat, 2019, 43:44)

Here, I outline how Bellingcat makes claims of truths in the discursive warfare. As a new and contemporary DSM, Bellingcat engages in parrhesiastic sousveillance, which entails both the examination of power and the act of speaking truth to it. As Garrido (2015) reminds us, this implies a risk for the truth-sayer and Bellingcat is aware that they are partaking in discursive warfare through their acts of parrhesiastic sousveillance, which entails affecting information flows in the digital society. Bellingcat does this through its OSINT investigations, through which they claim authority in their truth claims. Another means of claiming authority is by associating themselves with the JIT.

On the 7th of August, 2014, the Joint Investigation Team (JIT) was formed containing police and judicial authorities of the Netherlands, Australia, Malaysia and Belgium who worked together with Ukraine authorities to determine who was responsible for the downing of MH17 and to collect evidence for criminal prosecution (Veiligheid, 2019; Zaken, 2018). Meanwhile, Bellingcat was at the time of the downing newly formed, the founder of Bellingcat Eliot Higgins tells that it took place “only three days after I started my own investigative journalism collective” (Podcast, 2019a, 2:50), so the downing of MH17 became Bellingcat’s first major investigation.

Since then, my organisation, Bellingcat, has gone from being just me and a few volunteers to 15 full-time employees. We break big global stories. Now we have identified the Sergei Skripal poisoning suspects, and we proved that cluster bombs were being used in Syria.

(Podcast, 2019a, 3:09)

The formation of Bellingcat's collective identity as a DSM is constructed in the quote above. Emphasis is placed on their rapid growth, indicating success, and their ability to find sensational stories which they not only report on but investigate and uncover the truth about. By claiming to have "identified" poisoning suspects and "proved" that cluster bombs were used in Syria, Bellingcat aims to instil the authority to make truth claims, by showcasing previous claimed successful investigations. Another way they aim to achieve authority is by refereeing to other sources which the audience might trust, such as the JIT. "The JIT confirmed what Bellingcat had already figured out" (Podcast, 2019d, 4:55), here Bellingcat not only refer to the JIT but also indicate that they were more efficient in uncovering the truth.

Bellingcat also claims authority through its OSINT methodology. As mentioned, OSINT methodology includes, among other means, vast decentralised networks of ordinary internet users and other OSINT investigators which enables the gathering of information and fact-checking of it, "That's the joy of open-source information. It comes from multiple independent people. So, it's much more solid because you can cross-reference each against the others" (Podcast, 2019c, 28:21). They emphasise that it is highly accessible for everyone, encouraging the audience to use it to investigate powerful actors as well as to fact-check Bellingcat's investigations. Thus, accountability through truth and transparency is an important aspect of their collective identity as a digital movement; both when it comes to holding dominant actors accountable, as well as when holding themselves accountable to claims they make.

But if the ongoing investigation into the Downing of Malaysian Airlines flight 17 teaches us anything, it's that open-source investigative journalism allows us to hold these reckless and callous state actors to account. (Bellingcat, 2019, 43:44)

The OSINT methodology used by Bellingcat in their investigations is therefore an important aspect of their parrhesiastic discourse genre, expressing an ideology that constructs their collective identity as a DSM. OSINT methodology enables them, through means such as "satellite imagery on Google Earth, social media posts, publicly accessible webcams" (Podcast, 2019c, 10:52), to unveil the truth in a world where truth is contested, to then "speak truth to power" (Bellingcat, 2019, 43:44) thereby revealing powerful actors' true nature. Further in the quote above, Bellingcat utilises transitivity by making three important connections on a textual level: open-source investigations are connected to ordinary people, referred to through the use of the inclusive pronoun "us", indicating that it's accessible for everyone; open-source investigations are implied to being able to unveil the truth; and the truth is then seen as a powerful tool itself, which can be used to hold powerful actors accountable for their actions. Thereby empowering anyone who utilises OSINT as a method to discover knowledge and truth,

thus through the notion of technopolitical agency reversing the classical setup of powerful actors being the subjects who assert their truth on ordinary people, the objects.

By the time Vladimir Putin had made his statement, Bellingcat had already begun to publish its first stories, verifying claims made about these videos and photographs, and thousands of manhours later, Bellingcat would have an answer as to who was responsible.

(Podcast, 2019a, 31:06)

In this quote, Bellingcat is connecting themselves to the War of Words and Putin himself. By emphasising that they are “verifying claims” through “thousands of manhours” of labour, they are arguing that it is they who possess the truthful answer about MH17, which, on a textual level, is a high degree of certainness/modality, thereby indicating that Putin’s claim of blaming Ukraine for the downing of MH17 is false. Further, by emphasising the amount of time Bellingcat has put into uncovering the truth, which they transparently have displayed by publishing their investigations, they are claiming credibility, in contrast to Putin who made a statement soon after the incident without transparency into the claim. By connecting themselves to Putin in this way collective identity is constructed, by personalising an adversary who is making untruthful statements in the discursive struggle. In contrast to Bellingcat who through their OSINT investigations are making truthful, transparent, and thoroughly grounded statements in the discursive war, again emphasising their authority in their truth claims.

Bellingcat’s truth claims are often built step-by-step to gain credibility through transparency. First, the context is presented, something which needs an answer, such as the unknown identities of people who might have been involved in the downing that the JIT had obtained secret recordings of from the Ukrainian intelligence service, SBU, and broadcasted.

The voices are what you might call persons of interest. These speakers could be vital to the investigation if they could be found. This felt like the ball had been passed back to Bellingcat. ... At that moment, it felt like Bellingcat’s investigation had become a manhunt. (Podcast, 2019d, 7:37)

SBU claimed that a codename, Khmury, heard in a recording was a high-ranking Russian military named Dubinsky, something which Bellingcat expressed some caution about, “Bellingcat is not in the habit of immediately believing the Ukrainian intelligence agencies any more than the Russian ones. They're both highly politicised”. However, the information was considered “a great clue” which needed to be validated (Podcast, 2019d, 9:23). Bellingcat lead investigator Christo Grozev set of this manhunt by investigating the proposed SBU hypotheses and “found them to be validated” (Podcast, 2019d, 9:40). Even though Bellingcat sent voice samples of Khmury and Dubinsky, obtained from open sources, to experts who deemed them to be the same person, Bellingcat “still couldn’t be quite sure” (Podcast, 2019d, 10:42).

Bellingcat only felt certain that they had the right person when the Russian journalist Pavel Kanygin, working for Novaya Gazeta and a guest on the podcast, sent a voice sample to another expert who confirmed “that the voice of Khmury and the voice of Sergei Dubinsky, it's the same person” (Podcast, 2019d, 13:54), , “Suddenly, the certainty level jumped from probable to definite when you could triangulate” (Podcast, 2019d, 14:23).

By gradually linking objects, persons, OSINT evidence, and events, often cross-referencing through multiple investigations, Bellingcat asserts increasing degrees of certainty/modality in their truth claims. By following these methodological procedures when investigating the downing of MH17, they were eventually able to make claims of truths with a high degree of modality, such as “Taken together, these figures form a chain of command, a line of culpability that reaches as far as the gates of the Kremlin” (Podcast, 2019e, 32:53) and “There is more than enough objective evidence to prove the Russian involvement in the Downing of MH17” (Bellingcat, 2019, 27:06). Thus, presenting alternative discourses which attempt to hold Russia accountable by assigning guilt and challenging discourses that are denying Russian involvement in the downing of MH17.

In the section above, a detailed version of how Bellingcat conducts parrhesiastic sousveillance, i.e., offers alternative information through their OSINT methodology, is accounted for, where they aim to alter power relations. Bellingcat places great emphasis on their OSINT methodology, asserting authority and credibility in their claims of truth through, by doing so, they articulate both a prognostic and motivational framing. By exhibiting several investigations throughout the podcast, in which they comment on the investigations and the discursive struggle in a meta-fashion, similar to Forensic Architecture’s meta-documentaries (Gutierrez, 2023), they are exhibiting examples of actions taken according to the prognostic framing. Thus, providing examples of where they have achieved success by being able to make accurate truth claims and hold powerful actors accountable. By showing that ordinary people can challenge power structures through OSINT means they motivate others to do the same. Furthermore, the discourse Unveiling the Truth through its truth-saying is an important part of the parrhesiastic discourse genre and constitutes a part of Bellingcat’s alternative epistemology. Bellingcat first, through their meta-discursive analysis, defines a dominant actor’s discourses in a discursive struggle about a social injustice, then, through their OSINT means, produces alternative discourses which deconstructs and disproves the dominant actor’s discourses as well as providing alternative claims of truth.

Seeking Support in Challenging Dominant Actors

In what follows, we shall see how Bellingcat appeals to experts and how Bellingcat aligns themselves with the victims of MH17 and their families, Ukrainian victims, and the wider audience, and promotes OSINT engagement to gather support and mobilise the movement in their struggle to challenge dominant actors. Thus, forming a collective identity which not only includes and is formed by Bellingcat’s centralised structure, but also their decentralised networks.

Drawing on the Words of Experts

As a DSM, Bellingcat aligns itself with experts such as scholars and journalists by drawing on their discourses to support their claims when challenging dominant actors, and by doing so the experts are included in forming the movement’s collective identity. Thus, their claims become

more credible since speakers who are regarded as trustworthy are more persuasive (Benford & Snow, 2000). Expert support is an important component of OSINT methodology and sometimes almost seems dependent on, “Collaborations also played a key role, and many of our key findings wouldn't have been possible without the help of Russian investigators from the Insider, the Conflict Intelligence team and Novaya Gazetea” (Bellingcat, 2019, 43:32).

When scholars appear in the podcast, Eliot Higgins usually begins by providing the context of a specific event, and then he or the expert state their name, title, and field of subject. Next, the expert usually makes an uninterrupted statement about the specific event, followed by a concluding comment from Eliot Higgins based on the new information. Here, Eliot Higgins describes a claim made by the Russian government in a press conference suggesting that a specific type of Ukrainian fighter plane shot down MH17, “Unfortunately for the Russians, the facts simply didn't add up. Here's aviation expert David Gleave again”, where David Gleave proceeded by providing expert knowledge debunking the Russian claim, saying that “The Sequoia 25 Frogfoot is an anti-tank airplane. ... So, in that sense, I just thought it was absolutely incredible, they seem to have just chosen the wrong aeroplane to put into the picture”. From that information Eliot Higgins then concluded that the Russian claim was incorrect (Podcast, 2019b, 23:37).

Bellingcat also aligns themselves with journalists who were in eastern Ukraine or Russia during the different investigations about MH17 to support their OSINT investigations, as in the example of Russian journalist Pavel Kanygin and the voice samples above. In these cases, a similar interactional control to the one of how scholars are utilised can be seen, where Eliot Higgins provides a context to which the journalist provides additional information which is used in their investigations to make conclusions. Bellingcat sometimes also utilises journalists in the podcast to provide additional context about events that would be difficult to describe otherwise, like in the example given below where Eliot Higgins begins by providing the general context about the crash site of MH17 and Max Seddon, a correspondent for Financial Times, shares his experience of visiting the crash site.

Basically, it was just this completely horrifying scene, like something out of Hieronymus Bosch and the clean-up operation was basically non-existent. It was being guarded by a group of about 10 random men with guns, several of whom were drunk. The leader called himself Commander Grumpy. (Podcast, 2019a, 18:00)

By using Hieronymus Bosch, who often painted late gothic depictions of hell described as macabre, disturbing, and surreal, as a metaphor for the crash site Max Seddon emphasises the effect the crash site had on him. He further emphasises this by describing the guards as “random men with guns” who were drunk, and to further denote how surreal the experience was he says that the leader calls himself “Commander Grumpy”, indicating the separatists' frivolous attitude to the macabre situation. Thus, Bellingcat's appeals to experts can be seen as means to support their narrative by providing context and credibility, as well as information that supports their OSINT investigations and thereby their truth claims.

Speaking for the Victims & Engaging the Public

In Bellingcat's aim to hold powerful actors accountable through truth, Bellingcat aligns themselves with the victims of MH17, their families and their audience, thereby including them as important beliefs in Bellingcat's collective identity, e.g., by emphasising the families' of MH17 victims' courage to stand up against a powerful and ruthless regime they are not only portrayed as passive victims, but active survivors,, "it's the ordinary victims of ruthless regimes who have inspired us to keep going, it's their courage and their truth to whom this series is dedicated" (Bellingcat, 2019, 45:07). Thus, Bellingcat draws interdiscursively from empowering victim-discourses performed by other social movements who represents victims by placing themselves on the victims' side and highlighting their need for recognition and sympathy (e.g., Dunn, 2004; Weldon, 2011). Further, Bellingcat aligns itself with another group which can be considered victims of the Ukrainian conflict, the people of Ukraine. Highlighting how ordinary Ukrainian people, both young pro-EU Ukrainians who demonstrated during the Maidan uprising and the Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the eastern parts of Ukraine, are caught up in a conflict between West and East, "Ukraine is eternally fated to be a prisoner of its geography, sandwiched between Europe and Russia, it has long faced both ways" (Podcast, 2019a, 4:27). Thereby, in this discourse, not aligning themselves with the West and its powerful actors in favour of the ordinary Ukrainian people who are victimised by powerful actors' material conflict about Ukraine's belonging. This stands in contrast to how they often placed themselves on the side of the West in the often-portrayed binary conflict of West vs. East. Thus, indicating that Bellingcat first and foremost is on the people's side.

Bellingcat further appeals to ordinary people for support in their attempts of holding powerful actors accountable by emphasising that anyone risks being exposed to powerful actors' discursive and social practices if they are not held accountable.

I hope too that listening to this podcast has increased your awareness of the duplicitous and truly murderous nature of the Russian regime. Time and time again, they display a brutal lack of remorse toward the loss of innocent human lives. Their instinct is to lie, to make the world a more confusing and divisive place. (Bellingcat, 2019, 43:44)

In the quote above, Eliot Higgins is speaking directly to the audience, the ordinary person who might become the victim of the Russian regime, depicting them as powerful, deceitful, and outright evil. By showing the ordinary person Russia's true nature through their investigations they are aligning themselves as a DSM with the ordinary people. Enlightening the people about powerful actors' actions by holding them accountable for their deeds, thereby protecting them. Bellingcat also appeals to basic human instincts such as sympathy to gather support from ordinary people.

... and this is the one that really gets to me when it gets to me, it's still in my memory, and I'm afraid I'm gonna forget it one day ... I've found a little girl, five or six or seven years

old completely naked, as most of them were because the wind speed ripped your clothes off as you fell, just lying there. For some reason I seem to remember that there was a, there was a rose growing up. I'm not sure if that's true, my mind is playing tricks. I photographed a lot. I didn't photograph her, I just felt like it seemed disrespectful. In retrospect, I really wish I had. I wish I'd taken photographs of everything. Because I carry these memories around with me and I'm really afraid I'm going to forget. (Podcast, 2019a, 21:22)

Here, Roland Oliphant, at the time the Moscow reporter for the Daily Telegraph and guest on the podcast, tells his experience of the crash site which deeply affected him. By emphasising how traumatic it was, wondering if he even remembers it correctly, and expressing regrets about not taking photos of it, the audience can sympathise and get a grasp of how horrific the scene was.

One thing that really stood out, not only because of the colour but also just what it was, was this pink Minnie Mouse, I think, lunchbox, and you know that symbolises, it illustrates for you that there was somebody who was likely a young woman, a young, a young girl, a young girl on board this plane. (Podcast, 2019a, 22:36)

Further, using quotes such as the one above, focusing on the victims' possessions, paradoxically functions as a way of humanising the victims, by ascribing human connotations to them. However, Bellingcat does not leave the audience overcome by sadness or hopelessness, they do offer a "call to arms" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 8) or a rationale for engaging in collective action, the motivational framing.

It's also our hope at Bellingcat that the tools and techniques we've described during this series and detailed on our website will inspire some of you to begin your own open-source investigations. After all, Bellingcat's MH17 investigation started with a small team of volunteers learning as they went. (Bellingcat, 2019, 43:44)

By encouraging the audience to educate themselves about OSINT methodology and to use it as a countermeasure against powerful actors, Bellingcat promotes technopolitical agency. They provide smaller guides such as "Check for Yourself" for episodes 1-5 (Podcast, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e) on how to use OSINT methodology. They also provide extensive guides on how to conduct OSINT investigations on their web page, as well as providing instructional

YouTube films (*Bellingcat - YouTube*, n.d.; *Resources*, n.d.). Bellingcat thus motivates collective action by promoting technopolitical agency to ordinary people to counteract powerful actors' abilities to set discursive agendas.

In Bellingcat's strive to conduct parrhesiastic sousveillance, altering power relations on a global scale by taking on regimes such as Russia's or other powerful actors, they utilise their advantage as a DSM being able to take on a hybrid form, using both their centralised structure and decentralised networks. Bellingcat does this by drawing on experts' discourses and crowdsourced information to support their parrhesiastic sousveillance agenda, thereby involving their networks in the creation of their collective identity. Furthermore, Bellingcat offers a combination of prognostic and motivational framing when mobilising their movement by promoting OSINT to their audience, thus furthering engagement with their decentralised networks. They also emphasise their collective identity of first and foremost being on the people's side, rather than powerful actors, thus attempting to place themselves outside of the traditional information system which enables the current power order. Though, this stands in contrast to their New Cold War discourse, where they align themselves with powerful actors from the West in their attempts of holding Russia accountable, thus showing inconsistencies in being a countermovement to all dominant actors. Bellingcat also, through transitivity, connects powerful actors' actions to ordinary people, showing that anyone can be victimised, by humanising the victims, drawing interdiscursively from victim-discourses thereby appealing to peoples' basic instincts. They thereby emphasise the importance of challenging dominant actors. Furthermore, to be able to speak truth to dominant actors through alternative discourses, Bellingcat utilises their alternative epistemology consisting of their meta-discursive analysis, providing them with awareness and knowledge about discourses practised in the discursive war. Then, through their OSINT methodology, Bellingcat provides truth claims, challenging hegemonic discourses, where their OSINT methodology not only is constituted and enabled by digital tools and open sources, but also their hybrid form of movement, i.e., both having a core team while simultaneously having decentralised networks which can be utilised for crowdsourcing of information, expert knowledge etc., all of which mainly are situated and practised online.

Implications of the Discursive Warfare

As far as I'm concerned, the ongoing Russian disinformation campaign, on top of repeated cyber-attacks against Bellingcat traced back to pro-Russian sources, is nothing but more evidence of their obvious guilt. (Bellingcat, 2019, 20:39)

In the sections above Bellingcat's attempts to change power orders through discursive struggles, where accountability through truth has been their main tool, have been shown. However, the discursive struggle has had implications for Bellingcat as well as other actors, both socio-politically and materially.

As Bellingcat's investigations about MH17 began to gather attention, the Russian regime noticed them. With Russian attention came several consequences, such as the Russian ambassador in Britain announcing that "Bellingcat, that it's not a media, this is the tool for the deep establishment to leak certain things" (Bellingcat, 2019, 14:44). They have also been exposed to cyberattacks which have been traced to Fancy Bear, "a cyber espionage group

closely linked to Russia's GRU military intelligence agency” (Bellingcat, 2019, 17:55), who tried to influence the American 2016 election by stealing and leaking emails from the Democratic Party. In 2016, a person in Bellingcat’s network was hacked where “They posted personal photographs and his partner's contact details online, along with Pro-Russian images” (Bellingcat, 2019, 18:22). Elliot Higgins has also been pursued through legal means during 2021-2022 by members of the Russian elite and Bellingcat’s lead investigator Christo Grozev have been placed on Russia’s most wanted list in 2022 (Fitzpatrick, 2023; Kottasová, 2022). All these practices, both socio-political and material, have had the aim of asserting and reproducing Russian power, by oppressing actors who oppose them by presenting alternative discourses/truths in the discursive struggle.

Other socio-political consequences of the discursive struggle are three legal cases brought from different parties against Russia: the JIT “wants to use the Dutch court system” (Bellingcat, 2019, 30:15); and “Kiev has taken Moscow to the International Court of Justice over the conflict in eastern Ukraine and Crimea” (Bellingcat, 2019, 30:35); and finally “a third line of attack is being opened up in the European Court of Human Rights”(Bellingcat, 2019, 35:31) by a group of family members to the victims. These court cases challenge Russian discourses about the events of MH17, as well as its involvement in the Ukrainian conflict, thus challenging Russian power.

‘So, you Americans you actually fight this war against us.’ He said that his own house was bombed by American bombs, and we were shocked to hear that we said. ‘Aren't you fighting a war against Ukrainian forces?’. They said no, ‘These are American forces fighting against us, and my house was destroyed by an American bomb.’, that was the most shocking thing to hear from a local militia guy. (Podcast, 2019a, 28:24)

The quote above, from journalist Anna Nemtsova, a guest on the podcast, who was in eastern Ukraine investigating how the separatists dealt with the victims’ bodies, is a retelling of what happened to her when she was abducted and interrogated by separatists. This illustrates that discourses have very real material consequences, where the separatists seem to fully believe that the West is an unjust agitator, and the East is the victim in this conflict, which dictates their actions.

Further socio-political consequences DSMs like Bellingcat can have in the future is exemplified by Bellingcat consulting the International Criminal Court (ICC) on how open-source evidence can be used in court (*About - Bellingcat*, 2023). A recent case in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) exemplified how open-source evidence can be used in trials, thus showing OSINT methodology’s potential to not only be used in discursive struggles but also to have a material impact in courts (Higgins, 2023).

Conclusion & discussion

To answer my research questions, the strengths, and main means of Bellingcat are their alternative discourses and epistemology, and hybrid form of movement. To be able to produce

alternative discourses, which are used to position Bellingcat against dominant actors in discursive struggles, Bellingcat **utilises their alternative epistemology**. This epistemology consists of: a meta-discursive analysis, which provides Bellingcat with knowledge about discourses practised in discursive warfare; their OSINT methodology, which provides the information that the contesting truth claims are based on; and their **hybrid** form of DSM, which supports their OSINT methodology and truth claims. This alternative epistemology allows Bellingcat to conduct parrhesiastic sousveillance by being aware of discursive struggles entailed by social injustices and to produce alternative discourses, which are used to conduct parrhesiastic truth-saying.

The four identified discourses performed by Bellingcat, the discourses performed by experts which Bellingcat draws upon, and the Russian discourses Bellingcat aims to counteract, together constitutes Bellingcat's discourse order. Bellingcat, as a DSM, engages in meta-narration by presenting its acts of parrhesiastic sousveillance. In the discourse War of Words, Bellingcat through their diagnostic framing meta-discursively identifies and analyses the discursive struggle surrounding the social injustice of the downing of MH17. Through their New Cold War Discourses Bellingcat identifies the actors of the discursive warfare and their antagonist, i.e., the dominant actor who has abused its power, which in this case is Russia. They often use certain words and metaphors to indicate that Russia is deceitful and dangerous, drawing interdiscursively from old and new Cold War discourses to further evoke emotions of the danger Russia pose. Bellingcat also presents the discourses used by the dominant actor/Russia to construct regimes of truths, which in this case are connected to notions such as troll-factories and disinformation. Then, Bellingcat through Unveiling the Truth acts according to their prognostic framing, with increasing modality, deconstructing, disproving, and providing alternative truths supported by evidence obtained through OSINT methodology, which contests the dominant actor's truths in the discursive struggle. In the discourse Seeking Support in Challenging Dominant Actors, Bellingcat obtains expert knowledge and information from their decentralised networks to support their investigations and truth claims, they also mobilise their movement through their motivational framing, by promoting engagement with their networks, as well as highlighting the victims of the conflict by interdiscursively drawing from empowering victim-discourses, to gather support by evoking emotions with the audience. Through these collective action frames, Bellingcat create a collective identity as a contemporary DSM characterised by parrhesiastic sousveillance, examining how power utilises its control of information flows to exert and sustain power structures, to then speak truth to it and motivate others to do the same.

This discourse order, accounted for above, constitutes a parrhesiastic discourse genre and is performed by Bellingcat to shape meaning and social reality by emphasising the importance of examining and holding powerful actors accountable by speaking truth to power. Thereby performing an ideology which opposes the asymmetrical power dynamics of current power structures. As showed in the section Implications of the Discursive Warfare, has the discursive struggle also led to socio-political and material consequences both for Bellingcat, the families of the victims, and Russia. Showing that the act of speaking truth to power entails risks for the truth-sayer and that the discursive warfare still is ongoing. However, there are hopes that OSINT methodology will be able to have further socio-political and material impacts than just through parrhesiastic truth-saying, by being able to be used as evidence in courts in the future.

There are also drawbacks of viewing Bellingcat as a DSM with a collective identity. The collective identity might become vague or diffuse when vast decentralised networks are included in it, which might lead to the collective identity losing its unifying abilities. There might also arise discrepancies between the two parts that constitute the hybrid formation about who should be considered a dominant actor who needs to be held accountable. In such cases the centralised structure might have ‘the final say’, thus questioning if the collective identity includes the decentralised networks or if they should be viewed as more of a tool for contemporary DSMs.

This article contributes knowledge to the field of social movement studies by arguing that Bellingcat is an example of a new type of contemporary DSM, who utilises a hybrid form of movement in their social justice struggles. The hybrid form is constituted by a combination of a small, centralised community of ‘sousveillance officers’ and a large social network of low-grade participants. Where Bellingcat as a group of investigators are the community of active ‘sousveillance officers’ who leads the investigations and utilises the large social network of low-grade participants. By not being composed only by a large social network they avoid the disadvantages that comes with a leaderless movement, such as lack of structure, accountability, and sustainability as mentioned by Gray & Gordo (2014), Higashida (2022), and Tufekci (2014), though, they still draw the advantages of having a large social network which they can utilise. This hybrid form can be due to the digital environment that they exist within as a social movement, which allows them to be fluid in their forms of organisation (Laaksonen & Porttikivi, 2022). By being a hybrid between a small community and a vast digital network, Bellingcat enjoys the advantages of both types of organisational forms of social movements, thus enabling them to conduct their acts of parrhesiastic sousveillance while also growing as a movement in a sustainable manor. I therefore argue that the conceptualisation of DSMs should take this hybrid form of movement into account as a possible structural form.

By primarily existing in a digital environment, are DSMs like Bellingcat, per Mann's & Ferenbok's (2013) notion, dependent on digital technology. Bellingcat's dependency on contemporary technology can be compared to the social movements studied by Anderson (2022), Higashida (2022), and Simonson (2016), who also found that contemporary technology was important for conducting sousveillance in their social struggles, therefore can this study confirm the **technological dependence for movements** conducting sousveillance. By conducting their activities almost entirely online are DSMs dependent on the internet being an democratic and open space, however, if restrictions were to increase like in countries such as China and their Great Firewall – which blocks content, spies on and analyses users' internet behaviour (Griffiths, 2021) – could their activities be severely hindered or unable to function, a challenge Bellingcat recently acknowledged in an article describing the difficulties in conducting OSINT research in China (Killing, 2023). With similar difficulties being posed by the social media platforms through which they often spread their truth-saying and crowdsources information. Furthermore, as Pendry, as well as Bellingcat themselves, notices, much of the same digital technology that enables the investigations and the spread of them, e.g., social media, simultaneously enables the spread of what they strive to counteract: disinformation and propaganda. Social media as a platform, therefore, seems not to be an effective means to utilise as a DSM to counteract regimes of truth, but rather the contemporary site for where much of the discursive struggles take place.

This article is also, to my knowledge, the first empirical study of Garrido's (2015) theoretical concept of parrhesiastic sousveillance, thereby, contributing to knowledge about parrhesiastic sousveillance and how it is performed through a contemporary DSM. Though the main focus in this article has been on the discursive struggle, or truth-saying, situated within its socio-political and material context, rather than on the technical aspects of performing sousveillance. Garrido expands on Mann's concept of sousveillance by situating it within its socio-political context, highlighting that through surveillance, is control of information and communication asserted, which sustain power structures. Therefore, I argue, that Garrido's concept of parrhesiastic sousveillance is more useful than Mann's original concept, because it allows us to understand the broader societal implications of surveillance and power asymmetries, as well as how it can be counteracted through truth-saying. Further, I argue that DSMs are characterised by parrhesiastic sousveillance, which is evident in this article by Bellingcat's because they both examines power within socio-political contexts, and challenges regimes of truths that sustain power structures by providing alternative discourses through their investigations. Further are Bellingcat's discourses performed through their investigations alternative because they challenge hegemonic discourses by questioning them and provides alternative truths, thereby breaking dominant actors', in this case Russia, control of information and communication. These alternative discourses who are providing truth claims also needs authority and credibility to be taken as seriously, which Bellingcat asserts through their OSINT methodology and their decentralised networks.

To conclude this article, I will make some propositions for future research. Research focusing further on the proposed hybrid form of movement, i.e., centralised structure and decentralised networks, could add further knowledge about how Bellingcat as a movement function and how closely or loosely connected the different parts of the movement are and how they interact. Comparative studies between Bellingcat and other DSMs are also called for since they are a new type of contemporary movement. Comparative studies could shed light on similarities and differences between DSMs in their collective identity, form of movement and/or acts of parrhesiastic sousveillance.

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