

Editorial Standards & Practices

Who We Are and What We Do

Bellingcat is an independent collective of researchers, investigators and citizen journalists who specialise in open source and social media investigation.

Our field is an exciting one and sees a variety of disciplines, such as advanced technology, forensic research and journalism come together.

With the convergence of so many diverse fields and skill sets, forging a unique set of editorial guidelines by which to operate is a challenge. Yet doing so is vitally important to ensure trust in the work we do.

What follows is an overview of the standards and practices that we at Bellingcat will look to hold ourselves to. These should also act as a guide to our researchers, editors and contributors.

Needless to say, what is written here will evolve as time passes and new challenges arise. No matter where our work takes us, however, we will always seek to apply the highest professional and ethical principles to what we do.

Values

We aim to achieve fairness and accuracy in our work at all times. We regularly report on issues of justice, transparency and accountability. As such, it is only fair that we look to hold our own work to these values.

We seek to establish facts through objectively documented evidence, presented completely and in full context. Our researchers seek to report fairly, transparently and without bias, fear or favour.

Impartiality

Bellingcat is editorially independent.

While we commit to investigate wrongdoing wherever it may occur, the strictest standards of fairness and impartiality must be applied at all times.

From time to time, Bellingcat may look to partner with other organisations. However, if the behaviour or standards of any prospective partner falls below that expected by Bellingcat, we will not work with them.

Journalistic and Research Ethics

When individuals or organisations are accused of wrongdoing, we will seek to give them the right to reply and a reasonable amount of time to respond. Accusations will only be made when there is a sound, evidential basis for doing so. Given the nature of some Bellingcat reports, however, we recognize some people may not be contactable (be they spies, drug lords, terrorists, or anyone who makes a point of being hard to find; also persons or organisations who have stated they will not honour right of reply approaches from Bellingcat).

Our researchers will always consider the potential consequences of publication for vulnerable groups or individuals. In certain circumstances, this may require us to balance such concerns with the wider public interest and vice versa.

Our researchers do not steal information and do not pay individuals or witnesses for their statements.

We commit to practicing good journalistic and research principles at all times.

Transparency

We aim to promote the use of open source tools for investigation and we encourage others to try these methods for themselves. However, we want people to do so openly and responsibly. We commit to lead the way by operating to the highest standards in this regard.

Our researchers will be as clear as possible with potential sources and subjects as to who they are, who they work for and what their intentions are when undertaking research.

There may be occasions when researchers have to disguise their online identity in order to expose wrongdoing. However, this course of action must not be taken lightly. Such investigations must be targeted, in the wider public interest and not done frivolously. In such circumstances, our researchers must not seek to needlessly draw in or interact with people who are not targets of their investigation.

We will always seek to be open about the methods and tools we use as well as the sources of our information.

Given our commitment to transparency, the use of anonymous sources is generally avoided. However, there may be isolated occasions when this is acceptable. Researchers should discuss any such instances where they believe an exception may apply with senior staff. All information from anonymous sources will be rigorously checked against open source evidence and other data. For the avoidance of doubt, information from an anonymous source should only be used as an intelligence lead and must be validated by objective, open-source and/or reproducible methods that would permit other media organizations or researchers to independently validate such facts.

Commitment to Accuracy

When our researchers and contributors submit stories, they go through a process of fact-checking and review by their fellow researchers before editing. However, information should be checked and double-checked by the authors of articles before they are submitted for review.

Researchers are expected to be fair, accurate and clearly show their work. Editors and reviewers will raise any questions they have before publication. If articles do not reach Bellingcat's standards, as described here, they will not be published.

We accept pitches from outside contributors, all of whom are expected to operate to the same standards as our researchers.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is never acceptable and will be dealt with severely. We strive to be original in all the work we do.

Privacy and Harm

Researchers must not go beyond what is reasonably required to obtain evidence of suspected wrongdoing.

They must not harass individuals they may be reporting on. It is important researchers act proportionately at all times when investigating and seeking comment from people who may form part of the stories they are working on.

Researchers must exercise caution when dealing with information they find during investigations and not publish private details without fully justifiable public interest reasons. Care must also be taken to not unnecessarily reveal information or images of those who may be family members or related to the subjects of our investigations. Bellingcat encourages other media who may build upon our work to follow these principles as well. When justified, we may place notices on our stories emphasizing these points.

When using content from social media, due concern should be given to individuals who appear or may be identifiable in the images or video. This is especially the case if they did not create or post the content in question.

Researchers must also consider the consequences for vulnerable groups who may be identifiable in videos or images before using such content in articles and investigations.

The impact on victims, survivors or relatives who have suffered loss due to accidents, or disasters must also be carefully considered. If researchers have to approach them during the course of their work, they must act with compassion and understanding. Researchers must also consider the consequences of publishing details in stories that may add to any suffering or loss sustained by such individuals.

Clarification and Corrections

If it becomes apparent that information in our articles is incorrect, we will seek to clarify and amend as soon as possible.

Any corrections will be clearly noted at the bottom of articles where incorrect information appeared.

Misspellings, typos and errors of grammar do not require a factual correction unless they relate to the likes of a name or a place.

Researchers should report anything that needs correcting to editors and senior staff.

Copyright and Images

We commit to using images and comments in context and never in a manner that may be misleading.

Our researchers and editors must show due care to ensure no copyrighted images and video are used in our published articles without prior permissions. If researchers are unsure about what images they can and cannot use, they should ask editors.

This relates to content on social media as well. If we want to use videos or images we find on social media - for example, taking them out of the format they were posted to annotate or use in our own videos and images - we must strive to ask permission from the uploader first whilst also verifying that the content belongs to them.

Embedding social media video or images in the body of stories in their original form - from the original tweet or Youtube post, for example, where the uploader's details are clearly identifiable - is acceptable in most cases.

In some cases it may be preferential to use screenshots instead of embedding posts to enable names to be removed or faces to be blurred so privacy and vulnerable individuals who may be identifiable are protected.

All images must be clearly credited and described accurately.

Conflicts of Interest

If Bellingcat researchers or contributors have a personal or financial stake in a subject they are writing about then they must make editors and senior staff aware of this.

Depending on the circumstances, full disclosure of the conflict may have to be made in written copy. In other cases, individuals may be disqualified from contributing on certain topics.

Personal views

While Bellingcat is aware that some authors may have views on certain subjects, these must be kept entirely separate from our journalistic work. We aim to be fair and even handed, in line with good journalistic and research practice where facts and the pursuit of truth come first.

Legal support

There may be occasions when there are claims, points or accusations within stories that require legal review before publication. If researchers feel an article contains such elements they should make editors and senior staff aware so they can check with qualified professionals.

It is our intention to strike formal relationships with legal counsel to help with these scenarios in the near future.