

Disinformation or difference of opinion? A plea for intellectual pluralism and informed debate

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This comment was submitted to *International Affairs* in late September 2018 and returned within 48 hours with a note that the journal does not publish rejoinders. That the article I comment on can be published at all is testimony to the sorry state of the field of International Relations, which since 9/11 has slowly descended to what I call in my *Discipline of Western Supremacy* (Pluto Press 2014) an ‘embedded discipline’ serving the requirements of war preparation and demonisation of the ‘enemy’. To allow peer review I had to refer to my own *Flight MH17, Ukraine and the new Cold War* in the third person and I also tried to be as ‘academic’ as possible and did not refer to the ‘mercenary quality’ of this research (as I do in the book), although ERC funding of work of this quality tells it all..

In their piece, ‘State, media and civil society in the information warfare over Ukraine: citizen curators of digital disinformation’, Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Mareike Hartmann and Rebecca Adler-Nissen draw a straight contrast not only between information and disinformation concerning the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 on 17 July 2014, but also, between the parties supplying it.¹ The authors acknowledge the context of information warfare, ‘the strategic use of information and disinformation to achieve political and military goals’.² Yet rather than assuming that such a contest will entail the use *on both sides* of truth and untruth as well as varying admixtures of the two (with untruth being either intentional or unintentional), they reserve the term ‘information’ (including ‘counter-disinformation’) for one side in the conflict (the government in Kiev that assumed power in February 2014 on the back of the Maidan demonstrations, and its Western backers). Disinformation, defined as a ‘purposeful effort to mislead, deceive, or confuse’, is ascribed solely to the Russian state and media.

By selecting Twitter messages, the channel used by both (pro-) Russian and Western commentators, the authors are able to compare what is being disseminated

¹ Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Mareike Hartmann and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, ‘State, media and civil society in the information warfare over Ukraine: citizen curators of digital disinformation’ *International Affairs* 94 (5) (2018) 975–994. I thank Hector Reban and Max van der Werff for helpful comments.

² Golovchenko et al. p. 976.

from either side by non-professionals, ‘citizens’ in this larger framework. ‘Citizens are curators of both disinformation and counter-disinformation, even in the context of state-sponsored information and state-controlled media’.³ The authors then indicate that for them, the criterion to distinguish between information and (pro-Russian) disinformation consists in the Joint Investigation Team’s (JIT) conclusions in the press conference on 24 May 2018.

This article accepts the JIT’s findings as reliable and accurate. Accordingly, as will be further explained in the section on methods below, social media posts that question the JIT findings (that the plane was shot down from territory controlled by Russian separatists using Russian weapons) are seen as examples of pro-Russian disinformation.⁴

Now to put the JIT conclusions in perspective, one might note that Malaysia, a full member, dissented from the JIT verdict, arguing that what was presented could not be construed as a basis for inculcating Russia; whilst JIT member Belgium has remained silent. Are we to assume that Malaysia (which had only been admitted belatedly to the JIT, in November 2014, apparently because of its political unreliability from a Western point of view) and possibly Belgium, fall for pro-Russian ‘disinformation’? If only the Netherlands and Australia, which formally accused Russia as guilty of the shoot-down, why is this accusation based on ‘information’?⁵

The assertion that ‘the Russian government... claimed that the Ukrainian military had shot down the plane’⁶ is not referenced and is not correct: the first reference to the crash was by Putin in a telephone conversation with Obama to protest the imposition by the United States of new sanctions on the previous day, 16 July, in which he mentions, halfway, that a report about it has just come in; next, the Russian top brass gave a press conference on 21 July in which they raised ten questions, referring to the deployment of Ukrainian government Buk batteries and to the fact that an Ukrainian

³ Golovchenko et al., p. 978 (on p. 977 they give the date, 18 July’).

⁴ Golovchenko et al., p. 979.

⁵ I leave aside the Kiev government, the fifth member of the JIT, which given its anti-Russian credentials, would not have dissented, although its representative at the press conference, the head of the SBU intelligence service, hardly opened his mouth on that occasion.

⁶ Golovchenko et al., p. 978.

military plane, ‘presumably an Su-25’, had been observed by Russian radar as climbing towards the Boeing. No positive claims were made on this occasion (other than the number of Buk radars activated on each day including the 17th), and neither did the Russian government (or the military) make such claims at any point afterwards.

The authors’ distinction between information and disinformation is therefore unworkable. If one wants to find her/his way through the web of propaganda woven by the two main sides in the Ukrainian civil war and their international backers, it will not do to label the conclusions presented at an impromptu press conference by the prosecution as irrefutable evidence. That is something for a court to decide, and with two JIT members unwilling or reticent to follow the prosecution’s claims (and the call by the lead prosecutor, Fred Westerbeke, for witnesses to come forward four years after the event), it is not a foregone conclusion that a court would follow the JIT’s case without further questioning.

In analysing the argument of the IA article and to economise on footnotes I will rely on two studies on the same issue, both by Western academics and published by established presses. The first is *Western Mainstream Media and the Ukraine Crisis. A study in conflict propaganda* by California State University professor Oliver Boyd-Barrett, published by Routledge (in the Media, War and Security series, 2017, here cited from the paperback edition of 2018).⁷ Why the authors have decided not to refer to it although it goes to the heart of their subject matter and was available before they published their article, I do not know. The other book is by Kees van der Pijl, professor emeritus of Sussex University, *Flight MH17, Ukraine and the new Cold War. Prism of disaster*. It was published in 2018 by Manchester University Press in the Geopolitical Economy series.⁸ Both works approach the downing of MH17 through an analysis of the context of the actual event, which allows the identification of probabilities, motives, and the like, all necessary to disentangle the ‘information warfare’ obscuring the details of what happened. Focussing on the event in isolation,

⁷ Oliver Boyd-Barrett, *Western Mainstream Media and the Ukraine Crisis. A study in conflict propaganda*, London: Routledge 2017 .

⁸ Kees van der Pijl, *Flight MH17, Ukraine and the new Cold War. Prism of disaster*. Manchester: Manchester University Press 2018. The book has simultaneously come out in German as *Der Abschuss. Flug MH17, die Ukraine und der neue kalte Krieg* (Cologne: PepyRossa).

as both the DSB and JIT have done, can be argued to increase the margin of error from this perspective.

The two monographs mentioned present a wealth of material undermining the absolute distinction between information and disinformation used by Golovchenko et al. Indeed as long as a complex matter like this has not been settled, both in a court of law and in the court of history, we should observe intellectual pluralism so as not to prematurely shut off valid routes of enquiry. This is not just a moral issue but also a precondition to wrest free from the propaganda war and, not least, to try and defuse the current tensions between the West and Russia and the inherent dangers thereof.

The validity of the DSB/JIT narrative

The JIT's 24 May press conference builds on its earlier press conference in September 2016 and on the Dutch Safety Board (DSB) technical investigation and cannot be seen in isolation from them. It is necessary to remind the reader that the DSB's remit is restricted by the 2010 law governing its work; assigning the Netherlands the lead role in both the technical and criminal investigations therefore implied observance of its provisions.

The law establishing the DSB (*Onderzoeksraad voor Veiligheid, OVV*) makes clear in Article 57 that *not all information it collects will be made public*, or put otherwise, its publications will not necessarily contain all it knows. Specifically, information that will harm the relations of the Netherlands with other states and international organisations, or harmful to economic or financial interests, *will not be reported* (art. 57.2 a and b, respectively).⁹ Besides this restriction, which on an issue like this has potentially enormous implications, Van der Pijl gives details of the CV of DSB director, Tjibbe Joustra, who was not only an insider of the Western intelligence world in his prior role as Anti-terrorism Coordinator, but also the co-author of the programme of the governing liberal party, the largest coalition partner in the Dutch government. Joustra's prejudiced attitude transpired when in media interviews following the publication of the DSB final report, he freely speculated on the

⁹ *Rijkswet Onderzoeksraad voor Veiligheid*, Art. 57.2 a and b, respectively.

<http://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0017613/2010-10-10#Hoofdstuk5> (last accessed 16 September 2018).

insurgents' motives, how 'the Buk got there', 'who gave the order' etc., aspects that were not the DSB's remit.¹⁰

Both Boyd-Barrett and Van der Pijl cite the many objections that have been made to the DSB Final Report presented in October 2015, such as the fact that it attributed the downing of the Boeing to a Buk anti-aircraft missile without specifying whether this was the original Soviet model still in use in Ukraine, or one of the post-1991 types developed in Russia. These latter versions alone can launch the type of missile carrying the warhead which the DSB *did* specify and which contains the tell-tale bowtie-shaped shrapnel pieces. Of the 2,800 bowtie-shaped pieces such a warhead contains, the DSB recovered *two* in the wreckage; whilst it took until August 2015 before parts of a Buk missile were found near the crash site.¹¹

There are also straightforward falsehoods ('disinformation') in the DSB report, such as the cargo of 1,376 kilos of highly flammable lithium ion batteries, most of which was stowed right behind the cockpit (which broke off after the plane had been hit). The DSB claims that the plane 'did not contain any dangerous goods', stating that '*a single lithium ion battery was included on the cargo manifest... [which] was declared as properly packaged and was therefore exempted from being classified as dangerous goods*'. It adds later in the report that 'as such, *this small item was not considered relevant to the investigation.*' That MH17 carried 1.3 ton of highly flammable, and once it burns, extremely explosive cargo on a passenger plane did not go unnoticed elsewhere though, for on 31 July, two weeks after the disaster, the US Department of Transportation issued new guidelines on the transport of lithium ion batteries, focussing 'specifically on shipments by air.'¹²

This then constituted the technical basis for the JIT criminal prosecution. Since neither the US nor Ukraine had supplied radar data, and Russia did so only in processed form, the Dutch-led JIT had to rely on the incomplete and partly questionable information laid down in the DSB report. Thus in its first press conference, the JIT still did not specify which type of Buk had fired the fatal shot although it took the evidence of the two bowtie-shaped shrapnel pieces pointing to a Russian role as given and used it liberally in its video animations. Since the JIT members including Ukraine were granted a veto (agreed on 7 August 2014)

¹⁰ Van der Pijl, *Flight MH17*, pp. 139-40, 143.

¹¹ Boyd-Barrett, *Western Mainstream Media*, p. 122; van der Pijl, *Flight MH17*, pp. 141-2.

¹² Van der Pijl, *Flight MH17*, pp. 142-3. Emphasis added in DSB quotes.

concerning the publication of information, the JIT thus worked under two serious restrictions: one laid down in the 2010 Dutch legislation, and one added restriction, effectively imposed by Ukraine (the one party which could possibly have reasons to withhold information besides the Netherlands).

To consider the results of both the DSB and JIT investigations ‘reliable and accurate’ without further explanation, as Golovchenko et al. do, and set it as the standard of ‘information’ (and dissent as pro-Russian ‘disinformation’) invalidates their conclusions. In fact the JIT itself for a time seemed to contest the DSB’s findings too. In December 2015, the senior Australian policeman on the JIT told the Victorian Coroners’ Court that given the questions raised by coroners concerning the Australian victims’ cause of death, a ‘tougher standard than the DSB report’ would be required if the prosecution would ever be able to obtain a conviction.¹³ In February 2016, chief JIT prosecutor Fred Westerbeke in a letter to relatives also appeared to throw open the investigation by admitting that the presence of another plane near MH17 was possible. He also dismissed the claim by ‘Bellingcat’ (see below) that it had the names of the alleged culprits, the Russian 53rd Buk regiment based in Kursk, as unfit for evidence.¹⁴

In the absence of radar data from the US and Ukraine (and with Russia’s data disqualified), the JIT proceeded to base its investigation on evidence that can be easily manipulated, such as phone intercepts and photos. Right after its first press conference in September 2016 (at which, unlike the DSB report’s presentation, questions were allowed), obvious problems were raised with both audio and video materials on which the JIT based its conclusion that a Buk missile launcher had travelled from Russia to a launch site in Ukraine, only to return there by an implausible detour along the front line in the civil war, whereas the alleged launch site was close to the Russian border. Audio evidence supplied by Kiev included parts that appeared to have been recorded before the event, and tapes showed signs of having been patched together.¹⁵ To the question of journalist, Joost Niemöller (author of a book in Dutch published a few months after the disaster), about the provenance of the phone intercepts of which the

¹³ Boyd-Barrett, *Western Mainstream Media*, p. 124

¹⁴ Van der Pijl, *Flight MH17*, p. 143.

¹⁵ Boyd-Barrett, *Western Mainstream Media*, p. 101; Van der Pijl, *Flight MH17*, p. 144.

JIT itself had noted that they included obvious fakes, the answer was that they had been *exclusively* supplied by the SBU intelligence service in Kiev.¹⁶

This then led to the May 2018 press conference at which the JIT showed parts of a Buk missile, which it only in the small print of the accompanying report noted that it need not have been the missile the Boeing had been downed with. Most surprisingly the JIT now unexpectedly embraced the 53rd Buk brigade theory of the Bellingcat collective. So who are Bellingcat, given that their initially dismissed evidence, ‘disinformation’, had now mutated to ‘information’?

Bellingcat and Eliot Higgins

What Golovchenko et al. call ‘citizens’ (who are not professional journalists etc.) are the dominant group in the Twitter core. Within it, ‘the most retweeted profile in the entire dataset is Eliot Higgins, a central member of the Bellingcat citizen journalist group that conducts open-source investigations on social media.’¹⁷ However, the ‘citizen’ status of both Higgins and Bellingcat can be contested, as they are in fact part of a network of prestigious and powerful Western institutions that would be the envy of the ‘Kremlin’ in terms of reach and actual syndication.

Golovchenko et al. provide the starting point of an answer when they write that *‘historically, intelligence services and propaganda institutions have posed as ordinary citizens to assume a credibility that they lack in their own roles’*.¹⁸ Given the declining trust in the mainstream media, ‘intelligence services and propaganda institutions’ may have decided that setting up their own avatars in social media to speak for them to an incredulous public is worth it. Would this be the case for Bellingcat?

Eliot Higgins made his name (‘Brown Moses’) by investigating Syrian government culpability in the gas attack in Ghouta in the summer of 2013 and

¹⁶ Joost Niemöller, *MH17. De Doofpotdeal* [preface, K. Homan]. Amsterdam: Van Praag, 2014. Although this book gave both sides of the story, the only criterion being possibility/plausibility, it was ignored by the mainstream media. See also Niemöller, ‘Waarom het OM bij MH17 nog niet eens het begin van een zaak heeft. *De Nieuwe Realist*, 29 September 2016 <http://joostniemoller.nl/2016/09/waarom-het-om-bij-mh17-nog-niet-eens-het-begin-van-een-zaak-heeft/> (Last accessed 29 September 2016).

¹⁷ Golovchenko et al., p. 991

¹⁸ Golovchenko et al., p. 992, emphasis added.

challenging veteran US journalist Seymour Hersh. Working with US Army Chemical Corps consultant Dan Kaszeta, Higgins' findings were reported by US mainstream newspapers such as the *New York Times*, as well as Human Rights Watch, to prove Syrian responsibility. However, the details about the missile hit provided by Higgins were contradicted one by one by MIT missile specialists Richard Lloyd and Ted Postol, who at one point concluded that Higgins 'has changed his facts every time new technical information has challenged his conclusion that the Syrian government must have been responsible for the sarin attack'.¹⁹ This is not just anecdote, because as 'Bellingcat', Higgins' typical method has been to demand answers to highly detailed, technical questions, riddles really, and when replies are forthcoming, to change the question or in the final instance, to shift to abuse.²⁰

Bellingcat, Higgins' new avatar, came online on 15 July 2014, two days before the downing of MH17. It subscribed line by line to the explanation of the disaster propounded by the Kiev interior ministry, NATO and now the JIT, and Higgins has been rewarded accordingly. He meanwhile is a non-resident fellow of the Atlantic Council's New Information Frontiers initiative and a Visiting Research Associate in the War Studies department at King's College London; in mid-2015 he wrote a report, co-authored with former US ambassador to Ukraine John Herbst, about 'Putin's War in Ukraine' for the Atlantic Council, which he also presented at the European Parliament at the invitation of Guy Verhofstadt, former Belgian prime minister and leader of the EP's Liberal fraction. Far from being a 'citizen' social media research network, and in addition to the prestigious connections of its founder, Bellingcat is supported by the USAID-funded Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, by the Dutch NGO 'Pax' (funded in turn by the Dutch government), as well as by Soros money.²¹ The Atlantic Council connection, with so many security and defence specialists in its Executive Council (alongside capital investors and US government alumni), bears out the above-cited admission of Golovchenko et al. that 'intelligence services and propaganda institutions have posed as ordinary citizens to assume a credibility that they lack in their own roles'.²²

¹⁹ Cited in Boyd-Barrett, *Western Mainstream Media*, p. 114.

²⁰ A particularly rude exchange is recorded here, <https://twitter.com/MaxvanderWerff/status/1010830829818220544> (last accessed 16 September 2018).

²¹ Boyd-Barrett, *Western Mainstream Media*, p. 114; Van der Pijl, *Flight MH17*, p. 139.

In sharp contrast to that other ‘citizen curator’, Julian Assange of Wikileaks, who has now been effectively locked up for eight years, the founder of Bellingcat enjoys unconditional support in the media. Indeed Higgins, writes Boyd-Barrett, ‘gained mainstream acclaim, in part, because “his findings” always matched up with propaganda themes peddled by the US government and its Western allies. Though most genuinely independent bloggers are ignored by the mainstream media, Higgins has found his work touted’.²³ This raises the question to what extent we should at least acknowledge that the West, too, is actively engaging in information warfare and not only relies on truthful ‘information/counter-disinformation’, but, if Bellingcat’s operations are anything to go by, equally on disinformation.

Is there Western information management too?

One obvious question that arises in the animated discussion of Russian propaganda techniques, but is not answered, is: doesn’t the same happen in the West? Are we really to believe, four years after the Snowden revelations about the unparalleled, worldwide surveillance by the US National Security Agency, that in reality, we are at the mercy of Russia when it comes to the manipulation of information? Has nobody noticed the difference in quality, in terms of smart packaging and persuasiveness, between what the Western corporate media and public relations giants supply, and the often clumsy propaganda coming from Russia?²⁴ One only has to think of the press conference of the Russian Ministry of Defence of 15 September 2018, where the Russian military documented that the Buk missile parts which had been displayed at the latest JIT press conference, actually were Ukrainian; but apparently overlooked that in the small print, the JIT had kept open that this may no have been the fatal missile after all (although everyone thought so).

There is no doubt that a segment of Twitter messages ‘deflects the blame away from the Kremlin by denying its involvement in the incident and instead blames

²² See Peter Phillips, *Giants. The Global Power Elite* [intro, W.I. Robinson]. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2018, pp. 232-53, for a detailed list of the CVs of the Atlantic Council’s 35 Executive Committee members.

²³ Boyd-Barrett, *Western Mainstream Media*, p. 115.

²⁴ Glenn Greenwald, *No Place to Hide. Edward Snowden, the NSA and the Surveillance State*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014; cf. Phillips, *Giants. The Global Power Elite*, chapter 6, for the interlocks between the corporate media and PR firms with the financial and security worlds.

Ukraine or the West’, but why is this per se ‘disinformation’?²⁵ What if this denial is a hypothesis that deserves to be investigated more closely, irrespective of how one depends on ‘Russian’ inspiration of any kind? The authors give the answer themselves:

curators who spread pro-Russian tweets may not be intentionally misleading, since these users may be fully convinced of the truthfulness of the stories they are retweeting. ... Structurally, however, these tweets become part of a larger disinformation campaign, supported by Russian media loyal to the government and by Kremlin officials presumably aware of a situation that involves Russian armed forces... The same structural issue holds for users who spread pro-Ukrainian narratives.²⁶

In other words, even if one is convinced, factually, of one or the other position (assuming for the moment there are only two), one is assigned to the categories ‘information’ or ‘disinformation’ because the authors have decided to accept the DSB/JIT conclusions hook, line and sinker. There cannot from this perspective be ‘curators’ who conscientiously, on the basis of their own findings and reasoning, come up with conclusions that contradict the DSB/JIT narrative without being deemed accomplices of ‘Russian disinformation’.

Paradoxically the authors confirm that actual state-sponsored Russian influencers carry little weight: among the 2,434 ‘core curators’, *none* could be designated a certified Russian troll!

In 2017 Twitter provided the US Congress with a list of 2,752 human-controlled Twitter profiles linked to Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA), popularly known as the ‘Russian Troll Farm’. *Interestingly, none of these trolls appeared in the [MH-17 traffic] core. Although it is impossible to determine with complete certainty, we found no indication that any of the citizen profiles in our sample were managed by the IRA.*²⁷

²⁵ Golovchenko et al., p. 985.

²⁶ Golovchenko et al. , p. 985.

²⁷ Golovchenko et al., p. 987, emphasis added.

So everything in the final analysis depends on the claim that what the DSB and JIT put forward, is ‘information’, and that by contesting it, one subscribes to ‘disinformation’. Why not take the ‘curators’ in the core, whom the authors have established are *not connected* to Moscow’s disinformation warfare, to task on what they actually say instead of dismissing whatever they say as disinformation? This might also have prevented painful misidentifications such as that of the Dutch Christian Democratic MPO, Pieter Omtzigt, as a peddler of disinformation, which only reveals that the authors are obviously not familiar with the situation on the ground and have put up names in their diagram on the basis of crude black-and-white criterion, without checking.²⁸ Or, why not look the other way and see if the information/counter-disinformation curators are perhaps ‘managed’ by Western backers, as Higgins and Bellingcat amply demonstrate, so that the contest is Western information management by governments, corporate media and PR giants, against independent bloggers (of whom the research finds they are *not* managed by Russia)?

All communication, writes Boyd-Bennet, and hence all text, is by definition biased by a choice of what to communicate, the selection of available information, and so on. This necessarily limits the truth. Perception management and the creation of a ‘totalistic information management’ only work to obfuscate that what is presented as a mainstream consensus, is also based on taking these steps.²⁹ If it can be established, as Golovchenko et al. do, that the most active critics of the DSB/JIT narrative operate on their own account rather than following Moscow’s instructions, isn’t it time to return to real, in-depth investigations of actual historical events and forget about second-order analysis of rival accounts, without original research into the available facts?

²⁸ Omtzigt is classified as a major provider of pro-Russian disinformation (cf. Golovchenko et al., p. 986, Figure 1). In reality, he has consistently subscribed to the DSB/JIT narrative (‘information’), but equally consistently, criticised the Dutch government for withholding information from parliament until he had to relinquish his portfolio following a press campaign against him in the closing weeks of 2017. Another misrepresentation is that of Max van der Werff, the most knowledgeable blogger on the topic in the Netherlands. He admittedly adopted the social media pseudonym ‘KremlinTroll’ in anticipation of being labelled as such for his unprejudiced, rigorous investigations in eastern Ukraine but that did not prevent the JIT from extensively consulting with him.

²⁹ Boyd-Barrett, *Western Mainstream Media*, p. 8