

Principles for Data Collection

Bellingcat regularly uses material shared online by individuals from a wide variety of locations and backgrounds. This is only natural given our focus on open source data and investigations. Despite the material being publicly available, however, Bellingcat considers the following questions when it uses the information it has gathered:

Does using the information serve an investigative purpose and is it in the public interest? If so, to what extent? The information must at least serve both of these purposes to be used and published as part of our investigations.

Could anybody be harmed by publishing the information? If so, to what extent? Do any elements of the information pose risks to a person's private life? What is the potential impact if information is erroneous or out of date? Are victims appropriately protected from those consequences?

Are there alternative approaches that would maximise the public purpose, such as combining material we may have found with information from other databases? Are there alternatives that would minimise harm?

Can the data be verified? Have reasonable steps been taken to verify the accuracy of the information? Can people in the investigation be notified before publication? What can be done to enable correction of errors identified after publication?

The ethical issues raised by the use of open source information are at the forefront of any decision to use data. As we often deal with issues related to rights violations and crimes, we must ensure that the identities of victims are protected and that those not directly involved in the violations are not exposed to harassment or other negative consequences as a result of our publications. Those documenting war crimes are particularly vulnerable given they often share images from active conflict zones, where local authorities can target them for retaliation. For example, it may be possible to geolocate a video to a specific location. But if the video is filmed from the home of a human rights activist, publishing that information can lead authorities to the door of that very activist.

We also consider the status of an individual and the civic value in publishing information about them. Children are particularly vulnerable, and when relevant images are used that contain images of children we take steps to remove the children from the images. We also do not use images unless they are relevant to our

stories and refrain from publishing images for shock value or to scandalise private individuals.

Datasets collected by Bellingcat are only shared externally with other organisations where the intent is to build on the original purpose of the data collection, or where there is a new purpose that meets the goals and objectives of Bellingcat. For example, our dataset of videos showing violence against journalists at Black Lives Matter protests was initially used for Bellingcat's own reporting on the violence, it was later shared with the Global Legal Action Network to build a legal case for challenging the use of riot equipment and non-lethal arms exports to the US from the UK. When working with other organisations to build datasets, agreements are first reached on how those data will be used in line with Bellingcat's data policy, goals and objectives. Datasets are not to be used for commercial purposes nor sold to third parties.