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# Echosec, Flashpoint's Open-Source Intelligence Solution, Is the "Best Tool" for Citizen Journalist Website Bellingcat

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The rapid growth and expansion of social networking and media-sharing websites have given rise to the popularity and development of citizen journalism.

The journalists who run [Bellingcat](#), a website created to investigate current events using open-source information, needed the most effective online tool available. They decided to try Echosec, a location-based social media search platform by Flashpoint, to find out how it performed against comparable products. Not only did Bellingcat adopt Echosec as a primary tool in the work of its contributors, but it has also conducted workshops for journalists in which they demonstrate the effectiveness and promoted the use of Echosec among colleagues.

## What Is [Bellingcat](#)?

Bellingcat was launched in 2014 and brings together contributors who specialize in open source and social media investigation and creates guides and case studies for the use of other citizen journalists to do the same. The site has published detailed reports of their research into various worldwide events that often do not receive widespread mainstream media coverage, including one that located a Russian Buk launcher in the region where Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down in 2014. Bellingcat's findings provided key evidence to the Dutch Safety Board's investigation into that incident.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Bodner: "Open-Source Activists Vindicated After Latest MH17 Report Blames Russia," The Moscow Times, September 28, 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/out-in-the-open-latest-mh17-report-55518>.

A reliable, accurate search platform is instrumental to Bellingcat fulfilling its purpose. The site's goals include: training and co-operating with journalists, NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations; non-profit, citizen-based groups that function independently of governments), and activists on online open source investigation; promoting the use of online open-source investigation among journalists, NGOs and activists; and to create networks of journalists, NGOs, and activists who can both work through and independently of Bellingcat. Working with such a diverse group of contributors, Bellingcat required a stable, reliable search tool that required little training to use and that provides up-to-the-minute and location-specific results.

Bellingcat contributors said that, prior to using Echosec, attempting to find posts from a specific location while being limited to keyword searches had been a big challenge while investigating a story. Finding a reliable service that wouldn't disappear or shut down the next day when a slight change was made in the APIs (Application Program Interface: a set of routines, protocols, and tools for building software applications) of relevant data sources, such as VK (a Russian social network) or Instagram. Multiple social media search tools were tried but over time, they all stopped working.

## Echosec Provides a User-Friendly, **Data-Diverse Solution**

Echosec gives users the ability to draw a geofence around a particular location of interest—as large as a country or as small as a building—and then search keywords within the chosen area to mine any publically-available social media data. Bellingcat contributor Ruslan Leviev says that Echosec has proved very useful for breaking news situations and being able to find information as it's being posted online. He notes it has assisted in various investigations as well—not only in finding evidence, but also in referencing images for geolocation.

Aric Toler, another Bellingcat contributor, says he uses Echosec for breaking news situations “to quickly find photos and videos to verify information and to track down first responses. Also some interesting stuff that I didn't expect with YouTube results, finding materials that I didn't think I could track down,” citing video footage of a prison in eastern Ukraine as an example.

Bellingcat uses and has used a variety of online search platforms in its work, but found that Echosec clearly distinguished itself as the most user-friendly option. “[The] interface is great,” says Toler, “[and it] doesn't take too much wrestling with to get stuff to work.” He also says there is a “good layout with the map and results,” remarking that “it's surprising how screwed up some of the interfaces are with this on other sites.” Leviev said that the decision to go with Echosec was not difficult, saying that compared to its rivals, “it was reasonably priced and had a good range of platforms it could search on.”

## Supporting Citizen Journalism Workshops

In their ongoing efforts to support and encourage citizen journalism, Bellingcat and their frequent collaborator, Conflict Intelligence Team, decided to offer workshops on open-source online investigating for international journalists from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFERL). The RFERL is an international news broadcasting organization whose purpose is to "report the news in 23 countries where a free press is banned by the government or not fully established."

In a typical workshop, a group of 20 journalists from various countries were divided into teams of six each. Over the course of the four-day workshop they were assigned various practical tasks and then prepared and undertook their own projects, all using Echosec accounts. For example, one group investigated the lives of the children of corrupt officials. Another investigated the circumstances of the recent crackdown in Kazakhstan, while another gathered information regarding an American drone strike in Pakistan where a Taliban leader was killed.

Toler was one of the workshop facilitators and said that, overall, the participants "were very happy with the service, and something I heard during the workshop was relief that there was a service out there that was 'stable.'" One journalist said Echosec was "great for verification of locations in photos and trying to find people that have relation to a certain location."

With two workshops completed and more to follow, Leviev considers the Bellingcat-Echosec collaboration to be a successful one. "During the training, we were able to demonstrate to the journalists from different countries how [Echosec] functions, showed them how to use it for their work, and how it's more convenient than competing products."

Echosec has become a valuable asset for Bellingcat's contributors, and its most recommended platform for use by numerous other international journalists. According to Leviev, "it's really the best tool that exists."

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