

FINAL REPORT:

Background:

This summer, thanks to the University of Toronto Faculty of Law's International Human Rights Program (IHRP), I have had the opportunity to work with Bellingcat. Having completed an IHRP fellowship last summer with Amnesty International Canada, I am thrilled to have the opportunity to complete a second IHRP fellowship with Bellingcat this summer.

My host organization(s):

Founded in 2014, Bellingcat is an open-source investigative organization headquartered in the Netherlands. According to its 2019-2021 policy plan, Bellingcat's work focuses on "war crimes, conflicts, human rights abuses, corruption, corporate misconduct, environmental crimes." Previously, Bellingcat released ground-breaking investigations into the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, the Skripal poisoning, and human rights abuses committed by Cameroonian armed forces against civilians. Bellingcat is regarded as a global leader in the use and development of open-source investigations techniques.

The Global Legal Action Network (GLAN) describes itself as an "independent organisation made up of legal practitioners, investigative journalists and academics." GLAN seeks to promote social justice through legal action, with a focus on four core themes: war and occupation; environmental and economic justice; migration and border violence; accountability and supply chains. GLAN's legal work has included, for example, bringing litigation against the United Kingdom for its importation of goods produced through forced labour. In March 2022, Bellingcat and the Global Legal Action Network officially announced the launch of the Justice and Accountability Unit, a joint initiative seeking to fuse the organizations' respective areas of expertise to hold wrongdoers to account. This May, I began my summer IHRP fellowship working alongside Bellingcat and GLAN. My fellowship ended on August 1st, 2023.

My experience working with Bellingcat and GLAN:

For both employees and summer fellows alike, Bellingcat has a decentralized, horizontal organizational structure. Summer fellows are encouraged to seek out the work which most interests them and to dictate the course of their summer experience. At the beginning of my fellowship, my broad ambition was to further develop my experience and expertise in the use of open-source investigations in international law. Specifically, I had two goals in mind: to gain experience conducting open-source investigations into violations of international law and to gain experience using open-source evidence to build a legal case. This summer, I had the chance to do both.

With respect to the former, since the beginning of my fellowship, I have worked on Bellingcat's Global Authentication Project (GAP). Composed primarily of volunteers and led by Bellingcat investigators, GAP's purpose is to "expose wrongdoing and to detail and clarify incidents using open-source information." The GAP project which I contributed to is an

investigation into incidents of civilian harm in Ukraine. For myself and my fellow GAP members, this work involved scrutinizing digital evidence for any clues which might help investigators corroborate an incident. A great deal of this work involved geolocation -- the process of identifying the exact geographical location where an incident occurred. Generally, geolocating evidence requires an investigator to search for identifiable or unique visual clues which suggest that the incident may have occurred in a particular location. Diehard TikTokers might be familiar with Trevor Rainbolt, a content creator renowned for his lightning-fast geolocations. Unlike Trevor Rainbolt, however, my geolocations often involve spending hours examining a piece of evidence in detail for any clues as to the location of an incident, a painstaking process of elimination and informed guesswork. That said, I truly enjoyed learning how to geolocate evidence and I am grateful to have had the chance to fine-tune my geolocation skills.

Finally, I note that my experience geolocating evidence with GAP often involved dealing with graphic evidence. Given that the focus of the project is on incidents of civilian harm, my fellow GAP investigators and I often worked with digital evidence of graphic injuries or death. In light of this, the Bellingcat team emphasized that the mental wellbeing of investigators is paramount and took steps to ensure that investigators, including summer students, were supported and felt comfortable in taking a step back from work if necessary. Bellingcat also instructed us on techniques to minimize the effect of said evidence, such as reviewing it in black and white or without sound. Ultimately, because of Bellingcat's efforts, I felt comfortable regularly working with graphic evidence and developed the techniques necessary to maintain good mental hygiene despite the graphic nature of the work.

I also had the opportunity to contribute to the Justice and Accountability Unit's legal work. Working under the supervision of GLAN's staff lawyers, I completed a long-term legal research project for the Justice and Accountability Unit's investigation into atrocity crimes committed in Ukraine. This project was focused on the elements of crimes against humanity. Specifically, my supervisors asked me to delve into the case law and to find examples of facts which met the thresholds of each of the constituent elements of crimes against humanity under international law. To that end, I reviewed all crimes against humanity cases from the International Criminal Court, as well as a significant number of cases from both the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. I then drafted a lengthy document breaking down the facts of each of the cases and sorting them by specific legal element. The European Union Advisory Mission Ukraine used this document to get Ukrainian legal professionals up to speed on the elements of crimes against humanity. Because the Rome Statute's system of complementarity gives national jurisdictions priority in prosecuting international crimes, developing the competency of Ukrainian lawyers in international law is vital in ensuring accountability for international crimes. I am grateful to my supervisors for giving me the opportunity to help build the legal expertise of Ukrainian lawyers. Beyond my long-term crimes against humanity project, I also contributed to other legal projects for GLAN that are currently confidential.

My workstation (and a furry coworker):

