

Will NYT Retract Latest Anti-Russian 'Fraud'?

Exclusive: In covering the new Cold War, The New York Times has lost its journalistic bearings, serving as a crude propaganda outlet publishing outlandish anti-Russian claims that may cross the line into fraud, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In a fresh embarrassment for The New York Times, a photographic forensic expert has debunked a new amateurish, anti-Russian analysis of satellite photos related to the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine in 2014, labeling the work "a fraud."

Last Saturday, on the eve of the second anniversary of the tragedy that claimed 298 lives, the Times touted the amateur analysis asserting that the Russian government had manipulated two satellite photos that revealed Ukrainian anti-aircraft missiles in eastern Ukraine at the time of the shoot-down.

The clear implication of the [article](#) by Andrew E. Kramer was that the Russians were covering up their complicity in shooting down the civilian airliner by allegedly doctoring photos to shift the blame to the Ukrainian military. Beyond citing this analysis by armscontrolwonk.com, Kramer noted that the "citizen journalists" at Bellingcat had reached the same conclusion earlier.

But Kramer and the Times left out that the earlier Bellingcat analysis was thoroughly torn apart by photo-forensic experts including Dr. Neal Krawetz, founder of the FotoForensics digital image analytical tool that Bellingcat had used. Over the past week, Bellingcat has been aggressively pushing the new analysis by armscontrolwonk.com, with which Bellingcat has close relationships.

This past week, Krawetz and other forensic specialists began weighing in on the new analysis and concluding that it suffered the same fundamental errors as the previous analysis, albeit using a different analytical tool. Given Bellingcat's promotion of this second analysis by a group with links to Bellingcat and its founder Eliot Higgins, Krawetz viewed the two analyses as essentially coming from the same place, Bellingcat.

"Jumping to the wrong conclusion one time can be due to ignorance," Krawetz explained in a blog post. "However, using a different tool on the same data that yields similar results, and *still* jumping to the same wrong conclusion is intentional misrepresentation and deception. It is fraud."

A Pattern of Error

Krawetz and other experts found that innocuous changes to the photos, such as adding a word box and saving the images into different formats, would explain the anomalies that Bellingcat and its pals at armscontrolwonk.com detected. That was the key mistake that Krawetz spotted last year in dissecting Bellingcat's faulty analysis.

Krawetz wrote: "Last year, a group called 'Bellingcat' came out with a report about flight MH17, which was shot down near the Ukraine/Russia border. In their report, they used FotoForensics to justify their claims. However, as I pointed out in my blog entry, they used it wrong. The big problems in their report:

–Ignoring quality. They evaluated pictures from questionable sources. These were low quality pictures that had undergone scaling, cropping, and annotations.

–Seeing things. Even with the output from the analysis tools, they jumped to conclusions that were not supported by the data.

–Bait and switch. Their report claimed one thing, then tried to justify it with analysis that showed something different.

"Bellingcat recently came out with a second report. The image analysis portion of their report heavily relied on a program called 'Tungstène'. ... With the scientific approach, it does not matter who's tool you use. A conclusion should be repeatable though multiple tools and multiple algorithms.

"One of the pictures that they ran through Tungstène was the same cloud picture that they used with ELA [error level analysis]. And unsurprisingly, it generated similar results – results that should be interpreted as low quality and multiple resaves. ... These results denote a low quality picture and multiple resaves, and not an intentional alteration as Bellingcat concluded.

"Just like last year, Bellingcat claimed that Tungstène highlighted indications of alterations in the same places that they claimed to see alterations in the ELA result. Bellingcat used the same low quality data on different tools and jumped to the same incorrect conclusion."

Although Krawetz posted his dissection of the new analysis on Thursday, he began expressing his concerns shortly after the Times article appeared. That prompted Higgins and the Bellingcat crew to begin a Twitter campaign to discredit Krawetz and me (for also citing problems with the Times article and the analysis).

When one of Higgins's allies mentioned my initial story on the problematic photo analysis, Krawetz noted that my observations supported his position that

Bellingcat had mishandled the analysis (although at the time I was unaware of Krawetz's criticism).

Higgins responded to Krawetz, "he [Parry] doesn't recognize you're a hack. Probably because he's a hack too."

Further insulting Krawetz, Higgins mocked his review of the photo analyses by writing: "all he has is 'because I say so', all mouth no trousers."

Spoiled by Praise

Apparently, Higgins, who operates out of Leicester, England, has grown spoiled by all the praise lavished on him by The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian and other mainstream publications despite the fact that Bellingcat's record for accuracy is a poor one.

For instance, in his first big splash, Higgins echoed U.S. propaganda in Syria about the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack – blaming it on President Bashar al-Assad – but was forced to back down from his assessment when aeronautical experts revealed that the sarin-carrying missile had a range of only about two kilometers, much shorter than Higgins had surmised in blaming the attack on Syrian government forces. (Despite that key error, Higgins continued claiming the Syrian government was guilty.)

Higgins also gave the Australian "60 Minutes" program a location in eastern Ukraine where a "getaway" Buk missile battery was supposedly videoed en route back to Russia, except that when the news crew got there the landmarks didn't match up, causing the program to have to rely on sleight-of-hand editing to deceive its viewers.

When I noted the discrepancies and posted screenshots from the "60 Minutes" program to demonstrate the falsehoods, "60 Minutes" launched a campaign of insults against me and resorted to more video tricks and outright journalistic fraud in defense of Higgins's faulty information.

This pattern of false claims and even fraud to promote these stories has not stopped the mainstream Western press from showering Higgins and Bellingcat with acclaim. It probably doesn't hurt that Bellingcat's "disclosures" always dovetail with the propaganda themes emanating from Western governments.

It also turns out that both Higgins and "armscontrolwonk.com" have crossover in personnel, such as Melissa Hanham, a co-author of the MH-17 report who also writes for Bellingcat, as does Aaron Stein, who joined in promoting Higgins's work at "armscontrolwonk.com."

The two groups also have links to the pro-NATO think tank, Atlantic Council, which has been at the forefront of pushing NATO's new Cold War with Russia. Higgins is now listed as a "nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Future Europe Initiative" and armscontrolwonk.com describes Stein as a nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East.

Armscontrolwonk.com is run by nuclear proliferation specialists from the Middlebury Institute for International Studies at Monterey, but they appear to have no special expertise in photographic forensics.

A Deeper Problem

But the problem goes much deeper than a couple of Web sites and bloggers who find it professionally uplifting to reinforce propaganda themes from NATO and other Western interests. The bigger danger is the role played by the mainstream media in creating an echo chamber to amplify the disinformation coming from these amateurs.

Just as The New York Times, The Washington Post and other major outlets swallowed the bogus stories about Iraq's WMD in 2002-2003, they have happily dined on similarly dubious fare about Syria, Ukraine and Russia.

And just as with the Iraq disaster, when those of us who challenged the WMD "group think" were dismissed as "Saddam apologists," now we're called "Assad apologists" or "Putin apologists" or simply "hacks" who are "all mouth, no trousers" – whatever that means.

For instance, in 2013 regarding Syria, the Times ran a front-page story using a "vector analysis" to trace the sarin attack back to a Syrian military base about nine kilometers away, but the discovery of the sarin missile's much shorter range forced the Times to recant its story, which had paralleled what Higgins was writing.

Then, in its eagerness to convey anti-Russian propaganda regarding Ukraine in 2014, the Times even returned to a reporter from its Iraq-falsehood days. Michael R. Gordon, who co-authored the infamous "aluminum tubes" article in 2002 that pushed the bogus claim that Iraq was reconstituting a nuclear weapons program, accepted some new disinformation from the State Department that cited photos supposedly showing Russian soldiers in Russia and then reappearing in Ukraine.

Any serious journalist would have recognized the holes in the story since it wasn't clear where the photos were taken or whether the blurry images were even the same people, but that didn't give the Times pause. The article led the front

page.

However, only two days later, the scoop blew up when it turned out that a key photo supposedly showing a group of soldiers in Russia, who then reappeared in eastern Ukraine, was actually taken in Ukraine, destroying the premise of the entire story.

But these embarrassments have not dampened the Times' enthusiasm for dishing out anti-Russian propaganda whenever possible. Yet, one new twist is that the Times doesn't just take false claims directly from the U.S. government; it also draws from hip "citizen journalism" Web sites like Bellingcat.

In a world where no one believes what governments say the smart new way to disseminate propaganda is through such "outsiders."

So, the Times' Kramer was surely thrilled to get fed a new story off the Web that claimed the Russians had doctored satellite photographs of Ukrainian Buk anti-aircraft missile batteries in eastern Ukraine just before the MH-17 shoot-down.

Instead of questioning the photo-forensic expertise of these nuclear proliferation specialists at armscontrolwonk.com, Kramer simply laid out their findings as further corroboration of Bellingcat's earlier claims. Kramer also mocked the Russians for trying to cover their tracks with "conspiracy theories."

Ignoring Official Evidence

But there was another key piece of evidence that the Times was hiding from its readers: documentary evidence from Western intelligence that the Ukrainian military did have powerful anti-aircraft missile batteries in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, and that the ethnic Russian rebels didn't.

In a report released last October, the Netherlands' Military Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD) said that based on "state secret" information, it was known that Ukraine possessed some older but "powerful anti-aircraft systems" and "a number of these systems were located in the eastern part of the country." MIVD added that the rebels lacked that capacity:

"Prior to the crash, the MIVD knew that, in addition to light aircraft artillery, the Separatists also possessed short-range portable air defence systems (man-portable air-defence systems; MANPADS) and that they possibly possessed short-range vehicle-borne air-defence systems. Both types of systems are considered surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). Due to their limited range they do not constitute a danger to civil aviation at cruising altitude."

Since Dutch intelligence is part of the NATO intelligence apparatus, this report means that NATO and presumably U.S. intelligence share the same viewpoint. Thus, the Russians would have little reason to fake their satellite photos showing Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile batteries in eastern Ukraine if the West's satellite photos were showing the same thing.

But there is a reason why the Times and other major mainstream publications have ignored this official Dutch government document – because if it's correct, then it means that the only people who could have shot down MH-17 belong to the Ukrainian military. That would turn upside-down the desired propaganda narrative blaming the Russians.

Yet, that blackout of the Dutch report means that the Times and other Western outlets have abandoned their journalistic responsibilities to present all relevant evidence on an issue of grave importance – bringing to justice the killers of 298 innocent people. Rather than “all the news that's fit to print,” the Times is stacking the case by leaving out evidence that goes in the “wrong direction.”

Of course, there may be some explanation for how both NATO and Russian intelligence could come to the same “mistaken” conclusion that only the Ukrainian military could have shot down MH-17, but the Times and the rest of the Western mainstream media can't ethically just pretend the evidence doesn't exist.

Unless, of course, your real purpose is to disseminate propaganda, not produce journalism. Then, I suppose the behavior of the Times, other MSM publications and, yes, Bellingcat makes a lot of sense.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "[MH-17: Two Years of Anti-Russian Propaganda](#)" and "[NYT Is Lost in Its Ukraine Propaganda](#)."]]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

MH-17's Unnecessary Mystery

Exclusive: Nearly 18 months after Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 crashed in eastern Ukraine, one of the troubling mysteries is why the U.S. government after rushing to blame Russia and ethnic Russian rebels then went silent, effectively

obstructing the investigation into 298 deaths, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As the whodunit mystery surrounding the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 nears the 1½-year mark, the Obama administration could open U.S. intelligence files and help bring justice for the 298 people killed in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014. Instead, a separate mystery has emerged: why has the U.S. government clammed up since five days after the tragedy?

Immediately after the crash, senior Obama administration officials showed no hesitancy in pointing fingers at the ethnic Russian rebels who were then resisting a military offensive by the U.S.-backed Kiev regime. On July, 20, 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry appeared on TV talk shows claiming there was a strong circumstantial case implicating the rebels and their Russian backers in the shoot-down.

After mentioning some information gleaned from “social media,” Kerry said on NBC’s “Meet the Press”: “But even more importantly, we picked up the imagery of this launch. We know the trajectory. We know where it came from. We know the timing. And it was exactly at the time that this aircraft disappeared from the radar.”

Two days later, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a “Government Assessment,” also citing “social media” seeming to implicate the rebels. Then, this white paper listed military equipment allegedly supplied by Russia to the rebels. But the list did not include a Buk missile battery or other high-powered anti-aircraft missiles capable of striking MH-17, which had been flying at around 33,000 feet.

The DNI also had U.S. intelligence analysts brief a few select mainstream reporters, but the analysts conveyed much less conviction than their superiors may have wished, indicating that there was still great uncertainty about who was responsible.

The Los Angeles Times article said: “U.S. intelligence agencies have so far been unable to determine the nationalities or identities of the crew that launched the missile. U.S. officials said it was possible the SA-11 [the designation for a Russian-made anti-aircraft Buk missile] was launched by a defector from the Ukrainian military who was trained to use similar missile systems.”

That uncertainty meshed somewhat with what I had been told by a source who had been briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts shortly after the shoot-down about what they had seen in high-resolution satellite photos, which they said showed what looked like Ukrainian military personnel manning the battery which

was believed to have fired the missile.

There is also an important distinction to make between the traditional “Intelligence Assessment,” which is the U.S. intelligence community’s gold standard for evaluating an issue, complete with any disagreements among the 16 intelligence agencies, and a “Government Assessment,” like the one produced in the MH-17 case.

As former CIA analyst Ray McGovern wrote: “The key difference between the traditional ‘Intelligence Assessment’ and this relatively new creation, a ‘Government Assessment,’ is that the latter genre is put together by senior White House bureaucrats or other political appointees, not senior intelligence analysts. Another significant difference is that an ‘Intelligence Assessment’ often includes alternative views, either in the text or in footnotes, detailing disagreements among intelligence analysts, thus revealing where the case may be weak or in dispute.”

In other words, a “Government Assessment” is an invitation for political hacks to manufacture what was called a “dodgy dossier” when the British government used similar tactics to sell the phony case for war with Iraq in 2002-03.

Demonizing Putin

Yet, despite the flimsiness of the “blame-Russia-for-MH-17” case in July 2014, the Obama administration’s rush to judgment proved critical in whipping up the European press to demonize President Vladimir Putin, who became the Continent’s *bete noire* accused of killing 298 innocent people. That set the stage for the European Union to accede to U.S. demands for economic sanctions on Russia.

The MH-17 case was deployed like a classic piece of “strategic communication” or “Stratcom,” mixing propaganda with psychological operations to put an adversary at a disadvantage. Apparently satisfied with that result, the Obama administration stopped talking publicly, leaving the impression of Russian guilt to corrode Moscow’s image in the public mind.

But the intelligence source who spoke to me several times after he received additional briefings about advances in the investigation said that as the U.S. analysts gained more insights into the MH-17 shoot-down from technical and other sources, they came to believe the attack was carried out by a rogue element of the Ukrainian military with ties to a hard-line Ukrainian oligarch. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com’s “Flight 17 Shoot-Down Scenario Shifts” and “The Danger of an MH-17 Cold Case.”]

But that conclusion if made public would have dealt another blow to America’s already shaky credibility, which has never recovered from the false Iraq-WMD

claims in 2002-03. A reversal also would embarrass Kerry, other senior U.S. officials and major Western news outlets, which had bought into the Russia-did-it narrative. Plus, the European Union might reconsider its decision to sanction Russia, a key part of U.S. policy in support of the Kiev regime.

Still, as the MH-17 mystery dragged on into 2015, I inquired about the possibility of an update from the DNI's office. But a spokeswoman told me that no update would be provided because the U.S. government did not want to say anything to prejudice the ongoing investigation. In response, I noted that Kerry and the DNI had already done that by immediately pointing the inquiry in the direction of blaming Russia and the rebels.

But there was another purpose in staying mum. By refusing to say anything to contradict the initial rush to judgment, the Obama administration could let Western mainstream journalists and "citizen investigators" on the Internet keep Russia pinned down with more speculation about its guilt in the MH-17 shoot-down.

So, silence became the better part of candor. After all, pretty much everyone in the West had judged Russia and Putin guilty. So, why shake that up?

The Ukrainian Buks

Yet, what has become clear after the initial splurge of U.S. blame-casting is that U.S. intelligence lacked key evidence to support Kerry's hasty judgments. Despite intensive overhead surveillance of eastern Ukraine in summer 2014, U.S. and other Western intelligence services could find no evidence that Russia had ever given a Buk system to the rebels or introduced one into the area.

Satellite intelligence reviewed both before and after the shoot-down only detected Ukrainian Buk missile systems in the conflict zone. One could infer this finding from the fact that the DNI on July 22, 2014, did not allege that Buks were among the weapons systems that Russia had provided. If Russian-supplied Buks had been spotted and the batteries of four 16-foot-long missiles hauled around by trucks are hard to miss their presence surely would have been noted.

But one doesn't need to infer this lack of evidence. It was spelled out in [a little-noticed report](#) by the Netherlands' Military Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD) that was made public last October when the Dutch Safety Board issued its findings on the causes of the doomed MH-17 flight. (Since the flight had originated in Amsterdam and carried many Dutch passengers, Netherlands took a lead role in the investigation.)

Dutch intelligence, which as part of NATO would have access to sensitive

overhead surveillance and other relevant data, reported that the only anti-aircraft weapons in eastern Ukraine capable of bringing down MH-17 at 33,000 feet belonged to the Ukrainian government.

MIVD made that assessment in the context of explaining why commercial aircraft continued to fly over the eastern Ukrainian battle zone in summer 2014. MIVD said that based on "state secret" information, it was known that Ukraine possessed some older but "powerful anti-aircraft systems" and "a number of these systems were located in the eastern part of the country."

But the intelligence agency added that the rebels lacked that capacity: "Prior to the crash, the MIVD knew that, in addition to light aircraft artillery, the Separatists also possessed short-range portable air defence systems (man-portable air-defence systems; MANPADS) and that they possibly possessed short-range vehicle-borne air-defence systems. Both types of systems are considered surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). Due to their limited range they do not constitute a danger to civil aviation at cruising altitude."

MIVD noted that on June 29, 2014, "the Separatists captured a Ukrainian armed forces military base in Donetsk [where] there were Buk missile systems," a fact that was reported in the press before the crash and attracted MIVD's attention.

"During the course of July, several reliable sources indicated that the systems that were at the military base were not operational," MIVD said. "Therefore, they could not be used by the Separatists."

In other words, it is fair to say based on the affirmative comments from MIVD and the omissions from the U.S. DNI's "Government Assessment" that the Western powers had no evidence that the ethnic Russian rebels or their Russian allies had operational Buk missiles in eastern Ukraine, but Ukraine did.

It also would have made sense that Ukraine would be moving additional anti-aircraft systems close to the border because of a feared Russian invasion as the Ukrainian military pressed its "anti-terrorism operation" against ethnic Russian fighters. They were resisting the U.S.-backed coup of Feb. 22, 2014, which had ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich, whose political base was in the east.

According to the Dutch Safety Board [report](#), issued last October, a Ukrainian warplane had been shot down by a suspected air-to-air missile (presumably from a Russian fighter) on July 16, 2014, meaning that Ukrainian defenses were probably on high alert. The Russian military also claimed that Ukraine had activated a radar system that is used to guide Buk missiles.

Gunning for Putin?

I was told by the intelligence source that U.S. analysts looked seriously at the possibility that the intended target was President Putin's official plane returning from a state visit to South America. His aircraft and MH-17 had similar red-white-and-blue markings, but Putin took a more northerly route and arrived safely in Moscow.

Other possible scenarios were that a poorly trained and undisciplined Ukrainian squad mistook MH-17 for a Russian plane that had penetrated Ukrainian airspace or that the attack was willful provocation designed to be blamed on the Russians.

Whoever the culprits and whatever their motive, one point that should not have remained in doubt was where the missile launch occurred. Remember that just three days after the crash, Secretary Kerry had said U.S. intelligence detected the launch and "We know where it came from."

But last October, the Dutch Safety Board still hadn't pinned down anything like a precise location. The report could only place the launch site within a 320-square-kilometer area in eastern Ukraine, covering territory then controlled by both Ukrainian and rebel forces. (The safety board did not seek to identify which side fired the fateful missile).

By contrast, Almaz-Antey, the Russian arms manufacturer of the Buk systems, conducted its own experiments to determine the likely firing location and placed it in a much smaller area near the village of Zaroshchenskoye, about 20 kilometers west of the Dutch Safety Board's zone and in an area under Ukrainian government control.

So, with the firing location a key point in dispute, why would the U.S. government withhold from a NATO ally (and investigators into a major airline disaster) the launch point for the missile? Presumably, if the Obama administration had solid evidence showing that the launch came from rebel territory, which was Kerry's insinuation, U.S. officials would have been only too happy to provide the data.

A reasonable conclusion from the failure to share this information with the Dutch investigators is that the data does not support the preferred U.S. government narrative. If there's a different explanation for the silence, the Obama administration has failed to provide it.

Amid the curious U.S. silence, the most significant public finding by Western intelligence is that the only powerful and operational anti-aircraft-missile systems in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, belonged to the Ukrainian military.

Nevertheless, the mainstream "conventional wisdom" remains that either the

ethnic Russian rebels or the Russians themselves shot down MH-17 and have sought to cover up their guilt.

Some of this certainty comes from the simpleminded game of repeating that Buk missiles are "Russian-made," which is true but irrelevant to the issue of who fired the missiles, since the Ukrainian military possesses Russian-made Buks.

But much of this "group think" can be credited to the speed with which the Obama administration got its narrative out immediately citing dubious "social media" and exploiting the West's disdain toward Russian President Putin. He was a ready-made villain for the story.

Lying First

A similar case occurred in 1983 when Korean Airlines Flight 007 penetrated deeply into Soviet territory and was pursued by a Soviet fighter that after issuing warnings that were ignored shot the plane down believing it was an enemy military aircraft. Though the Soviets quickly realized they had made a terrible mistake, the Reagan administration wanted to use the incident to paint the "evil empire" in the vilest of tones.

So, Reagan's propagandists edited the ground-control intercepts to make it appear that the Soviets had committed willful murder, a theme that was presented to the United Nations and was gullibly lapped up by the mainstream U.S. news media.

The fuller story only came out in 1995 with a book entitled *Warriors of Disinformation* by Alvin A. Snyder, who had been director of the U.S. Information Agency's television and film division. He described how the tapes were edited "to heap as much abuse on the Soviet Union as possible."

In a boastful but frank description of the successful disinformation campaign, Snyder noted that "the American media swallowed the U.S. government line without reservation. Said the venerable Ted Koppel on the ABC News 'Nightline' program: 'This has been one of those occasions when there is very little difference between what is churned out by the U.S. government propaganda organs and by the commercial broadcasting networks.'"

Snyder concluded, "The moral of the story is that all governments, including our own, lie when it suits their purposes. The key is to lie first."

In the case of MH-17, however, the falsehoods and deceptions are not simply some spy-vs.-spy propaganda game of gotcha, but rather obstruction of justice in a mass murder investigation. Whatever evidence the Obama administration has, it should have long since been made available to the investigators, but so far the

official Dutch reports have indicated no such assistance.

While the U.S. government maintains its official silence, the Russian manufacturer has tried to provide details about the functioning of various generations of Buks and challenged the conclusion from the Dutch Safety Board of precisely which model likely brought down MH-17. The Dutch Safety Board cited a 9M38M1 missile using a 9N314M warhead that dispersed “butterfly or bow-tie” fragments that ripped through MH-17’s fuselage.

But Almaz-Antey reported that only older warheads and missiles of the 9M38 type have that signature. “The 9M38M1 missile has no H-shaped striking elements,” Almaz-Antey executive Yan Novikov said. According to the manufacturer, the Russian army had phased 9M38 missiles out years ago, but they remained part of Ukraine’s arsenal.

On Jan. 14, the Russian aviation agency issued its own report critical of the Dutch Safety Board’s understanding of the Buk models, saying that “the strike elements” in the 9N314M warhead did not match the composition of what was recovered from MH-17. Yet, the Dutch-led criminal investigation, which is being partly run by the Ukrainian government, has shown little interest in the Russian information.

‘Citizen Journalists’

The inquiry has been much more welcoming of leads from Bellingcat, a group of “citizen journalists” led by British blogger Eliot Higgins.

Despite having made significant mistakes in an earlier investigation of the Syria-sarin case in 2013 including misstating the range of suspect missiles Higgins has been treated as something of a savant on the MH-17 case, basing his analysis on photographs that popped up the Internet purportedly showing a Buk missile system heading eastward from Donetsk shortly before MH-17 was shot down.

Although one of the first lessons anyone learns about the Internet is to be cautious about what you find there, Higgins and Bellingcat relied on the images to conclude that this battery was dispatched from Russia under the command of Russian forces. The bloggers went so far as to send a list of Russian soldiers’ names as suspects to the MH-17 criminal investigators.

There are, of course, problems with this sort of theorizing. First, it assumes that the photos on the Internet are genuine and not cleverly photo-shopped fakes. The Internet can be a devil’s playground for both amateur and professional disinformationists.

But even assuming that the photos are real, there is the question of why if this

cumbersome weapons system was lumbering around eastern Ukraine apparently for weeks did Western intelligence services not detect it from overhead surveillance either before or after the shoot-down? From Bellingcat's Internet photos, it appears there was no effort to conceal the Buk system, which curiously was headed eastward toward Russia, not westward from Russia.

Higgins also directed an Australian TV film crew to the supposed site in Luhansk where the Buk battery, minus one missile, supposedly made its getaway back into Russia. However, the location that the Australian crew filmed clearly was the wrong place. None of the landmarks matched up, but this journalistic fraud did nothing to diminish Bellingcat's sterling reputation with mainstream Western news outlets which routinely repeat the group's allegations. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Reckless Stand-upper on MH-17.](#)"]

It turns out that it is an excellent business model for "citizen" bloggers to find "evidence" on the Internet to reinforce whatever the U.S. government's propagandists are claiming. Since the U.S. government's credibility is shaky at best, young hip Internet readers are more inclined to trust what they hear from bloggers and when the bloggers echo what Washington claims, the mainstream media and well-funded think tanks will join in the applause.

Latest Speculation

Earlier this month, Bellingcat's speculation identifying Russian soldiers as MH-17 suspects based on their assignment to a Buk battery was splashed across the international press, including Dutch television, London's Telegraph and the British Guardian. The U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty headlined [its story](#), "Russian Soldiers Said Involved in Downing of MH17 Airliner," complete with photos of Russian soldiers with their eyes blacked out, courtesy of Bellingcat.

"The Britain-based Bellingcat group said it had identified up to 100 Russian soldiers who may have knowledge of the movements of the Buk missile launcher that destroyed the Boeing 777 on July 17, 2014, killing all 298 on board," RFE/RL reported, citing a quote that Higgins gave to the Telegraph: "We have the names and photos of the soldiers in the June convoy who traveled with the MH17 Buk, their commanders, their commanders' commanders, etc."

Higgins told Dutch TV channel NOS that Bellingcat believed that at least 20 soldiers in an air-defense unit based in Kursk "probably" either fired the missile or know who fired it.

The Dutch-led prosecution team, which collaborates with the Ukrainian government and nations that suffered large numbers of deaths from the crash including

Australia and Malaysia, welcomed the Bellingcat information and promised to “seriously study it.”

Not that the prosecution team has asked or appears interested, but one could also give the sleuths a list of Americans who almost certainly have knowledge about who fired the missile and from exactly where: CIA Director John Brennan, DNI James Clapper, Secretary of State John Kerry and President Barack Obama.

Any one of those officials could end the strange silence that has enveloped the U.S. government’s knowledge about the MH-17 shoot-down since five days after the tragedy and by doing so perhaps they could finally bring some clarity and justice to this mystery.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

MH-17 Case: ‘Old’ Journalism vs. ‘New’

Exclusive: For skilled intelligence operatives, the Internet can be a devil’s playground, a place to circulate doctored photos, audio and documents, making investigations based on “social media” and such sources particularly risky, a point worth recalling in the mystery of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The first thing any thinking person learns about the Internet is not to trust everything you see there. While you can find much well-researched and reliable material, you’ll also encounter disinformation, spoofs, doctored photographs and crazy conspiracy theories. That would seem to be a basic rule of the Web *caveat emptor* and be careful what you do with the information unless you’re following a preferred neocon narrative. Then, nothing to worry about.

A devil-may-care approach to Internet-sourced material has been particularly striking when it comes to the case of the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014. It has now become *de rigueur* on the part of the West’s mainstream news outlets to tout the dubious work of a British Internet outlet called Bellingcat, which bases its research on photographs and other stuff pulled off the Internet.

Bellingcat's founder Eliot Higgins also has made journalistic errors that would have ended the careers of many true professionals, yet he continues to be cited and hailed by the likes of The New York Times and The Washington Post, which have historically turned up their noses about Internet-based journalism.

The secret to Higgins's success seems to be that he reinforces what the U.S. government's propagandists want people to believe but lack the credibility to sell. It's a great business model, marketing yourself as a hip "citizen journalist" who just happens to advance Official Washington's "group thinks."

We saw similar opportunism among many wannabe media stars in 2002-03 when U.S. commentators across the political spectrum expressed certitude about Iraq's hidden stockpiles of WMD. Even the catastrophic consequences of that falsehood did little to dent the career advancements of the Iraq-WMD promoters. There was almost no accountability, proving that there truly is safety in numbers. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Through the US Media Lens Darkly.](#)"]

New Recruits

But there's always room for new recruits. Blogger Higgins made his first splash by purporting to prove the accuracy of U.S. government claims about the Syrian government firing rockets carrying sarin gas that killed hundreds of civilians on Aug. 21, 2013, outside Damascus, an incident that came close to precipitating a major U.S. bombing campaign against the Syrian military.

Those of us who noted the startling lack of evidence in the Syria-sarin case much as we had questioned the Iraq-WMD claims in 2002-03 were brushed aside by Big Media which rushed to embrace Higgins who claimed to have proved the U.S. government's charges. Even The New York Times clambered onboard the Higgins bandwagon.

Higgins and others mocked legendary investigative journalist Seymour Hersh when he cited intelligence sources indicating that the attack appeared to be a provocation staged by Sunni extremists to draw the U.S. military into the war, not an attack by the Syrian military.

Despite Hersh's long record for breaking major stories including the My Lai massacre from the Vietnam War, the "Family Jewels" secrets of the CIA in the 1970s, and the Abu Ghraib torture during the Iraq War The New Yorker and The Washington Post refused to run his articles, forcing Hersh to publish in the London Review of Books.

Hersh was then treated like the crazy uncle in the attic, while Higgins an unemployed British bureaucrat operating from his home in Leicester, England was the new golden boy. While Higgins was applauded, Hersh was shunned.

But Hersh's work was buttressed by the findings of top aeronautical scientists who studied the one rocket that carried sarin into the Damascus suburb of Ghouta and concluded that it could have traveled only about two kilometers, far less distance than was assumed by Official Washington's "group think," which had traced the firing position to about nine kilometers away at a Syrian military base near the presidential palace of Bashar al-Assad.

"It's clear and unambiguous this munition could not have come from Syrian government-controlled areas as the White House claimed," Theodore Postol, a professor in the Science, Technology, and Global Security Working Group at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, told MintPress News.

Postol published "Possible Implications of Faulty US Technical Intelligence in the Damascus Nerve Agent Attack of August 21st, 2013" in January 2014 along with Richard Lloyd, an analyst at the military contractor Tesla Laboratories who was a United Nations weapons inspector and has to his credit two books, 40 patents and more than 75 academic papers on weapons technology.

Postol added in the MintPress interview that Higgins "has done a very nice job collecting information on a website. As far as his analysis, it's so lacking any analytical foundation it's clear he has no idea what he's talking about."

In the wake of the Postol-Lloyd report, The New York Times ran what amounted to a grudging retraction of its earlier claims. Yet, to this day, the Obama administration has failed to withdraw its rush-to-judgment charges against the Syrian government or present any verifiable evidence to support them.

This unwillingness of the Obama administration to fess up has served Higgins well, in that there is still uncertainty regarding the facts of the case. After all, once a good propaganda club is forged for bludgeoning an adversary, it's not something Official Washington lays down easily. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case.](#)"]

The MH-17 Mystery

So, Higgins and Bellingcat moved on to the mystery surrounding MH-17, where again the Obama administration rushed to a judgment, pinning the blame on the Russians and ethnic Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine who were fighting the U.S.-backed regime in Kiev.

Though again hard evidence was lacking at least publicly Official Washington and its many minions around the world formed a new "group think" Russia's President Vladimir Putin was responsible for the 298 deaths.

On July 20, 2014, just three days after the MH-17 shoot-down in an article with

the definitive title "U.S. official: Russia gave systems," The Washington Post reported that an anonymous U.S. official said the U.S. government had "confirmed that Russia supplied sophisticated missile launchers to separatists in eastern Ukraine and that attempts were made to move them back across the Russian border."

This official told the Post that there wasn't just one Buk battery, but three. The supposed existence of these Buk systems in the rebels' hands was central to the case blaming Putin, who indeed would have been highly irresponsible if he had delivered such powerful weapons capable of hitting a commercial airliner flying at 33,000 feet as MH-17 was to a ragtag rebel force of ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.

But there were problems with this version, including the fact that as reflected in a "government assessment" from the Director of National Intelligence released on July 22, 2014, (or five days after the crash) U.S. intelligence listed other weapons allegedly provided by the Russians to the ethnic Russian rebels but not a Buk anti-aircraft missile system.

In other words, two days after the Post cited a U.S. official claiming that the Russians had given the rebels the Buks, the DNI's "government assessment" made no reference to a delivery of one, let alone three powerful Buk batteries.

And that absence of evidence came in the context of the DNI larding the report with every possible innuendo to implicate the Russians, including references to "social media" entries. But there was no mention of a Buk delivery.

The significance of this missing link is hard to overstate. At the time eastern Ukraine was the focus of extraordinary U.S. intelligence collection because of the potential for the crisis to spin out of control and start World War III. Plus, a Buk missile battery is large and difficult to conceal. The missiles themselves are 16-foot-long and are usually pulled around by truck.

U.S. spy satellites, which supposedly can let you read a license plate in Moscow, surely would have picked up these images. And, if for some inexplicable reason a Buk battery was missed before July 17, 2014, it would surely have been spotted on an after-action review of the satellite imagery. But the U.S. government has released nothing of the kind not three, not two, not one.

Different Account

Instead, in the days after the MH-17 crash, I was told by a source that U.S. intelligence had spotted Buk systems in the area but they appeared to be under Ukrainian government control. The source who had been briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts said the likely missile battery that launched the fateful

missile was manned by troops dressed in what looked like Ukrainian uniforms.

At that point in time, the source said CIA analysts were still not ruling out the possibility that the troops were actually eastern Ukrainian rebels in similar uniforms but the initial assessment was that the troops were Ukrainian soldiers. There also was the suggestion that the soldiers involved were undisciplined and possibly drunk, since the imagery showed what looked like beer bottles scattered around the site, the source said. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[What Did US Spy Satellites See in Ukraine?](#)"]

Subsequently, the source said, these analysts reviewed other intelligence data, including recorded phone intercepts, and concluded that the shoot-down was carried out by a rogue element of the Ukrainian government, working with a rabidly anti-Russian oligarch, but that senior Ukrainian leaders, such as President Petro Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, were not implicated. However, I have not been able to determine if this assessment was a dissident opinion or a consensus within U.S. intelligence circles.

Another intelligence source told me that CIA analysts did brief Dutch authorities during the preparation of the Dutch Safety Board's report but that the U.S. information remained classified and unavailable for public release. In the Dutch report, there is no reference to U.S.-supplied information although the report reflects sensitive details about Russian-made weapons systems, secrets declassified by Moscow for the investigation.

Into this propaganda-laced controversy stepped Eliot Higgins and Bellingcat with their "citizen journalism" and Internet-based investigation. The core of their project was to scour the Internet for images purportedly of a Buk missile system rumbling through the eastern Ukrainian countryside in the days before the MH-17 crash. After finding several such images, Bellingcat insistently linked the Buk missiles to the Russians and the rebels.

Supposedly, this investigative approach is better than what we traditional journalists do in such cases, which is to find sources with vetted intelligence information and get them to share it with us, while also testing it out against verifiable facts and the views of outside experts. Our approach is far from perfect and often requires some gutsy whistle-blowing by honest officials but it is how many important secrets have been revealed.

A central flaw in the Internet-based approach is that it is very easy for a skilled propagandist in a government dirty-tricks office or just some clever jerk with Photoshop software to manufacture realistic-looking images or documents and palm them off either directly to gullible people or through propaganda fronts that appear as non-governmental entities but are really

bought-and-paid-for conduits of disinformation.

This idea of filtering propaganda through supposedly disinterested and thus more credible outlets has been part of the intelligence community's playbook for many years. I was once told by Gen. Edward Lansdale, one of the pioneers of CIA psychological operations, that his preference always was to plant propaganda in news agencies that were perceived as objective, that way people were more believing.

Lost Credibility

After the Pentagon Papers and Watergate scandals of the 1970s, when the American people were suspicious of whatever they heard from the U.S. government, the Reagan administration in the 1980s organized inter-agency task forces to apply CIA-style techniques to manage the perceptions of the U.S. public about foreign events. The architect was the CIA's top propaganda specialist, Walter Raymond Jr., who was transferred to the National Security Council staff to skirt legal prohibitions against the CIA manipulating Americans.

Raymond, who counseled his subordinates in the art of gluing black hats on U.S. adversaries and white hats on U.S. friends, recommended that U.S. propaganda be funneled through organizations that had "credibility in the political center." Among his favorite outlets were Freedom House, a non-governmental "human rights" group that was discreetly funded by the U.S. government, and the Atlantic Council, a think tank led by former senior U.S. government officials and promoting strong NATO ties. [For more background, see "[How Reagan's Propaganda Succeeded.](#)"]

The same process continues to this day with some of the same trusted outlets, such as Freedom House and Atlantic Council, but requiring some new fronts that have yet to be identified as propaganda conduits. Many receive discreet or backdoor funding from the U.S. government through the National Endowment for Democracy or other U.S. entities.

For instance, the U.S. Agency for International Development (along with billionaire George Soros's Open Society Institute) funds the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, which targets governments that have fallen into U.S. disfavor and which are then undermined by reporting that hypes alleged ties to organized crime and corruption. The USAID/Soros-funded OCCRP also [collaborates](#) with Bellingcat.

Higgins has become a favorite, too, of the Atlantic Council, which has partnered with him for a report about Russian involvement in the Ukraine conflict, and he wins praise from the Soros-financed Human Rights Watch, which has lobbied for

U.S. military intervention against the Assad government in Syria. (Like Higgins, Human Rights Watch pushed discredited theories about where Syrian sarin-gas attack originated.)

Yet, because Higgins's claims dovetail so neatly with U.S. government propaganda and neoconservative narratives, he is treated like an oracle by credulous journalists, the Oracle of Leicester. For instance, Australia's "60 Minutes" dispatched a crew to Higgins's house to get the supposed coordinates for where the so-called "Buk getaway video" was filmed another curious scene that appeared mysteriously on the Internet.

When "60 Minutes" got to the spot near Luhansk in eastern Ukraine where Higgins sent them, the location did not match up with the video. Although there were some billboards in the video and at the site in Luhansk, they were different shapes and all the other landmarks were off, too. Still, the Australian news crew pretended that it was at the right place, using some video sleight-of-hand to snooker the viewers.

However, when I published screen grabs of the getaway video and the Luhansk location, it was clear to anyone that the scenes didn't match up.

Yet, instead of simply admitting that they were in error, the "60 Minutes" host did a follow-up insulting me, asserting that he had gone to the place identified by Higgins and claiming that there was a utility pole in the video that looked something like a utility pole in Luhansk.

At this point, the Australian program went from committing an embarrassing error to engaging in journalistic fraud. Beyond the fact that utility poles tend to look alike, nothing else matched up and, indeed, the landmarks around the utility poles were markedly different, too. A house next to the pole in the video didn't appear in the scene filmed by the Australian crew. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's ["A Reckless Stand-upper on MH-17."](#)]

An Enduring Aura

But Higgins's aura was such that objective reality and logic no longer seemed to matter. That two utility poles looked somewhat alike when nothing else in a video matched up at all somehow proved you were at the right location simply because the Oracle of Leicester had sent you there.

I've known many excellent journalists who saw their careers ended because they were accused of minor slip-ups on difficult stories when they were clearly correct on the big picture. Think, for instance, of the harsh treatment meted out to Gary Webb on Nicaraguan Contra drug trafficking and Mary Mapes on George W. Bush's shirking his National Guard duty. But different rules clearly apply if

you make serious errors in line with U.S. propaganda. For example, think of virtually the entire mainstream news media buying into the false Iraq-WMD claims and facing almost no accountability at all.

The second set of rules apparently applies to Higgins and Bellingcat, who have the mainstream U.S. media on bended knee despite a record of journalistic misfeasance or malfeasance. In editorials about the Dutch Safety Board report last week, both The New York Times and The Washington Post hailed Bellingcat as if they were recognizing that the old mainstream media had to rub shoulders with supposedly “new media” to have any credibility. It was a moment that would have made the CIA’s Lansdale and Raymond smile.

The Post’s neocon editorial writers, who have backed “regime change” in Iraq, Syria and other targeted countries, viewed the Dutch Safety Board report as vindicating the initial rush to judgment blaming the Russians and praised the work of Bellingcat although the Dutch report pointedly did not say who was responsible or even where the fatal missile was launched.

“More forensic investigation will be necessary to identify precisely where the missile came from, but the safety board identified a 123-square-mile area mostly held by the separatists,” the Post wrote, although a different way of saying the same thing would be to note that the launch area identified by the report could suggest the firing by either Ukrainian forces or the rebels.

The Post did observe what has been one of my repeated complaints – that the Obama administration is withholding the U.S. intelligence evidence that Secretary of State John Kerry claimed three days after the shoot-down had identified the precise location of the launch.

Yet, the subsequent U.S. silence on that point has been the dog not barking. Why would the U.S. government, which has been trying to pin the shoot-down on the Russians, hide such crucial evidence unless perhaps it doesn’t corroborate the desired anti-Putin propaganda theme?

Yet, the Post sought to turn this otherwise inexplicable U.S. silence into further condemnation of Putin, writing: “A Dutch criminal investigation is underway that may identify the individuals who ordered and carried out the shootdown. We hope the prosecutors will have access to precise data scooped up by U.S. technical means at the time of the shootdown, which made clear the responsibility of Russian-backed forces.”

So, the Post sees nothing suspicious about the U.S. government’s sudden reticence after its initial loud rush-to-judgment. Note also the Post’s lack of skepticism about what these “technical means” had scooped up. Though the U.S.

government has refused to release this evidence in effect, giving those responsible for the shoot-down a 15-month head start to get away and cover their tracks the Post simply takes the official word that the Russians are responsible.

Then comes the praise for Bellingcat: "Already, outside investigations based on open sources and social media, such as by the citizen journalist group Bellingcat, have shown the Buk launcher was probably wheeled into Ukraine in June from the Russian 53rd Air Defense Brigade, based outside Kursk. The criminal probe should aim to determine whether Russian servicemen were operating the unit when it was fired or helping the separatists fire it."

No Skepticism

Again, the Post shows little skepticism about this version of events, leaving only the question of whether Russian soldiers fired the missile themselves or helped the rebels fire it. But there are obvious problems with this narrative. If, indeed, the one, two or three Russian Buk batteries were rumbling around eastern Ukraine the month before the shoot-down, why did neither U.S. intelligence nor Ukrainian intelligence notice this?

And, we know from the Dutch report that the Ukrainians were insisting up until the shoot-down that the rebels had no surface-to-air missiles that could threaten commercial airliners at 33,000 feet. However, the Ukrainians did have Buk systems that they were positioning toward the east, presumably to defend against possible Russian air incursions.

On July 16, 2014, one day before MH-17 was hit, a Ukrainian Su-25 fighter-jet was shot down by what Ukrainian authorities said was an air-to-air missile, according to the Dutch report. Presumably the missile was fired by a Russian fighter patrolling the nearby border.

So, if the Ukrainians already believed that Russian warplanes were attacking along the border, it would make sense that Ukrainian air defense units would be on a hair-trigger about shooting down Russian jets entering or leaving Ukrainian airspace.

Even if you don't want to believe what I was told about U.S. intelligence analysts suspecting that a rogue Ukrainian military operation targeted MH-17, doesn't it make sense that an undisciplined Ukrainian anti-aircraft battery might have mistakenly identified MH-17 as a Russian military aircraft leaving Ukrainian airspace? The Ukrainians had the means and the opportunity and possibly a motive after the shoot-down of the SU-25 just one day earlier.

The Dutch Safety Board report is silent, too, on the question raised by Russian

officials as to why the Ukrainians had turned on their radar used to guide Buk missiles in the days before MH-17 was shot down. That allegation is neither confirmed nor denied.

Regarding Bellingcat's reliance on Internet-based photos to support its theories, there is the additional problem of Der Spiegel's report last October revealing that the German intelligence agency, the BND, challenged some of the images provided by the Ukrainian government as "manipulated." According to Der Spiegel, the BND blamed the rebels for firing the fateful Buk but said the missile battery came not from the Russians but from Ukrainian government stockpiles. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Germans Clear Russia in MH-17 Case.](#)"]

However, a European source told me that the BND's information was not as categorical as Der Spiegel reported. And, according to the Dutch report, the Ukrainian government reported that a Buk system that the rebels captured from a Ukrainian air base was not operational, a point where the rebels are in agreement. They also say they had no working Buks.

Yet, even without the BND's warning, great caution should be shown when using evidence deposited often anonymously on the Internet. The idea of "crowd-sourcing" these investigations also raises the possibility that a skillful disinformationist could phony up a photograph and then direct an unwitting or collaborating reporter to the image.

Though I am no expert in the art of doctoring photographs, my journalism training has taught me to approach every possible flaw in the evidence skeptically. That's especially true when some anonymous blogger directs you to an image or article whose bona fides cannot be established.

One of the strengths of old-fashioned journalism was that you could generally count on the professional integrity of the news agencies distributing photographs. Even then, however, there have been infamous cases of misrepresentations and hoaxes. Those possibilities multiply when images of dubious provenance pop up on the Internet.

In the case of MH-17, some photo analysts have [raised specific questions](#) about the authenticity of images used by Bellingcat and others among the "Russia-did-it" true-believers. We have already seen in the case of the "Buk-getaway video" how Higgins sent a reporting team from Australia's "60 Minutes" halfway around the world to end up at the wrong spot (but then to use video fakery to deceive the viewers).

So, the chances of getting duped must be taken into account when dealing with unverifiable sources of information, a risk that rises exponentially when

there's also the possibility of clever intelligence operatives salting the Internet with disinformation. For the likes of psy-ops innovator Lansdale and propaganda specialist Raymond, the Internet would have been a devil's playground.

Which is one more reason why President Barack Obama should release as much of the intelligence evidence as he can that pinpoints where the fateful MH-17 missile was fired and who fired it. [For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "[NYT Plays Games with MH-17 Tragedy](#)."]]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

NYT Plays Games with MH-17 Tragedy

Exclusive: There was a time when The New York Times showed some skepticism toward the words of the U.S. government but those days are long gone, as the Times sinks even deeper into the propaganda swamp with an editorial playing games with the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 tragedy, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In its single-minded propaganda campaign against Russia, The New York Times has no interest in irony, but if it had, it might note that some of the most important advances made by the Dutch Safety Board's report on the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 came because the Russian government declassified sensitive details about its anti-aircraft weaponry.

The irony is that the Obama administration has steadfastly refused to declassify its intelligence information on the tragedy, which presumably could answer some of the key remaining mysteries, such as where the missile was fired and who might have fired it. While merrily bashing the Russians, the Times has failed to join in demands for the U.S. government to make public what it knows about the tragedy that killed 298 people on July 17, 2014.

In other words, through its hypocritical approach to this atrocity, the Times has been aiding and abetting a cover-up of crucial evidence, all the better to

score some propaganda points against the Russ-kies, the antithesis of what an honest news organization would do.

In its editorial on Thursday, The Times also continues to play on the assumed ignorance of its readers by hyping the fact that the likely weapon, a Buk surface-to-air missile, was “Russian-made,” which while true, is not probative of which side fired it. Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, is armed with Russian-made weapons, too.

But that obvious fact is skirted by the Times highlighting in its lead paragraph that the plane was shot down “by a Russian-made Buk surface-to-air missile,” adding: “Even Russia, which has spent much of those [past] 15 months generating all kinds of implausible theories that put the blame on Ukraine, and doing its best to thwart investigations, has had to acknowledge that this is what happened.”

Though some misinformed Times’ readers might be duped into finding that sentence persuasive, the reality is that Russia has long considered it likely that a Buk or other anti-aircraft missile was involved in downing MH-17. That’s why Russia declassified so many details about its Buk systems for the Dutch investigation something governments are loath to do and the Russian manufacturer issued a report on the likely Buk role last June.

But the Times pretends that the Russians have now been cornered with the truth, writing that Russia “now argues that the fatal missile was an older model that the Russian armed forces no longer use, and that it was fired from territory controlled by the Ukrainian government.” Yet, much of that information was provided by the Russian missile manufacturer a long time ago and was the subject of a June press conference.

Blinded by Bias

If the Times editors weren’t blinded by their anti-Russian bias, they also might have noted that the Dutch Safety Board and the Russian manufacturer of the Buk anti-missile system are in substantial agreement over the older Buk model type that apparently brought down MH-17.

Almaz-Antey, the Russian Buk manufacturer, said last June that its analysis of the plane’s wreckage revealed that MH-17 had been attacked by a “9M38M1 of the Buk M1 system.” The company’s Chief Executive Officer Yan Novikov said the missile was last produced in 1999.

The Dutch report, released Tuesday, said: “The damage observed on the wreckage in amount of damage, type of damage, boundary and impact angles of damage, number and density of hits, size of penetrations and bowtie fragments found in

the wreckage, is consistent with the damage caused by the 9N314M warhead used in the 9M38 and 9M38M1 BUK surface-to-air missile.”

Also on Tuesday, the manufacturer expanded on its findings saying that the warhead at issue had not been produced since 1982 and was long out of Russia’s military arsenal, but adding that as of 2005 there were 991 9M38M1 Buk missiles and 502 9M38 missiles in Ukraine’s inventory. Company executives said they knew this because of discussions regarding the possible life-extension of the missiles.

Based on other information regarding how the warhead apparently struck near the cockpit of MH-17, the manufacturer calculated the missile’s likely flight path and firing location, placing it in the eastern Ukrainian village of Zakharchenko, a few miles south of route H21 and about four miles southwest of the town of Shakhtars’k, a lightly populated rural part of Donetsk province that the Russians claim was then under Ukrainian government control.

The area is about three miles west of the 320-square-kilometer zone that the Dutch report established as the likely area from which the missile was fired. In July 2014, control of that area was being contested although most of the fighting was occurring about 100 kilometers to the north, meaning that the southern sector was more poorly defined and open to the possibility of a mobile system crossing from one side to the other.

Almaz-Antay CEO Novikov said the company’s calculations placed the missile site in Zakharchenko with “great accuracy,” a possible firing zone that “does not exceed three to four kilometers in length and four kilometers in width.” However, Ukrainian authorities said their calculations placed the firing location farther to the east, deeper into rebel-controlled territory.

Thus, the importance of the U.S. intelligence data that Secretary of State John Kerry claimed to possess just three days after the plane was shot down. Appearing on NBC’s “Meet the Press” on July 20, 2014, Kerry declared, “we picked up the imagery of this launch. We know the trajectory. We know where it came from. We know the timing. And it was exactly at the time that this aircraft disappeared from the radar.”

But the U.S. government has released none of its evidence on the shoot-down. A U.S. intelligence source told me that CIA analysts briefed the Dutch investigators but under conditions of tight secrecy. None of the U.S. information was included in the report and Dutch officials have refused to discuss any U.S. intelligence information on the grounds of national security.

In the weeks after the shoot-down, I was told by another source briefed by U.S.

intelligence analysts that they had concluded that a rogue element of the Ukrainian government tied to one of the oligarchs was responsible for the attack, while absolving senior Ukrainian leaders including President Petro Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk. But I wasn't able to determine whether this U.S. analysis was a consensus or a dissident opinion.

Last October, Der Spiegel reported that German intelligence, the BND, concluded that the Russian government was not the source of the missile battery that it had been captured from a Ukrainian military base but the BND blamed the ethnic Russian rebels for firing it. However, a European source told me that the BND's analysis was not as conclusive as Der Spiegel had described.

Prior to the MH-17 crash, ethnic Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine were reported to have captured a Buk system after overrunning a government air base, but Ukrainian authorities said the system was not operational, as recounted in the Dutch report. The rebels also denied possessing a functioning Buk system.

Who Has These Buks?

As for whether the 9M38 Buk system is still in the Ukrainian military arsenal, government officials in Kiev claimed to have sold their stockpile of older Buks to Georgia, but Ukraine appears to still possess the 9M38 Buk system, based on photographs of Ukrainian weapons displays. In other words, Ukrainian authorities appear to be lying about this crucial point.

It should be noted, too, that just because Russia no longer deploys the outmoded Buks doesn't mean that it might not have some mothballed in warehouses that could be pulled out and distributed in a sub rosa fashion, although both the Ukrainian rebels and Russian officials deny this possibility. According to the Ukrainian government, the rebels were only known to have shoulder-fired "manpads" in July 2014 and that weapon lacked the range to destroy a civilian airliner flying at 33,000 feet.

Yet, rather than delve into this important mystery, The New York Times' editorial simply repeats the Western "group think" that took shape in the days after the MH-17 tragedy, that somehow the rebels shot down the plane with a Buk missile supplied by Russia. The other possibility that the missile was fired by some element of the Ukrainian security forces was given short-shrift despite the fact that Ukraine had moved some of its Buk batteries into eastern Ukraine presumably to shoot down possible Russian aircraft incursions.

As described in the Dutch report, this Ukrainian concern was quite real in the days before the MH-17 shoot-down. On July 16 just one day before the tragedy a Ukrainian SU-25 jetfighter was shot down by what Ukrainian authorities concluded

was an air-to-air missile presumably fired by a Russian warplane patrolling the Russia-Ukraine border.

Thus, it would make sense that the Ukrainian air-defense forces would have moved their Buk batteries close to the border and would have been on the lookout for possible Russian intruders entering or leaving Ukrainian air space. So, one possibility is that a poorly organized Ukrainian air-defense force mistook MH-17 for a hostile Russian aircraft high-tailing it back to Russia and fired.

Another theory that I'm told U.S. intelligence analysts examined was the possibility that a rogue Ukrainian element linked to a fiercely anti-Russian oligarch may have hoped that President Vladimir Putin's official plane was in Ukrainian air space en route home from a state visit to South America. Putin's jet and MH-17 had very similar markings. But Putin used a different route and had already landed in Moscow.

A third possibility, which I'm told at least some U.S. analysts think makes the most sense, was that the attack on MH-17 was a premeditated provocation by a team working for a hard-line oligarch with the goal of getting Russia blamed and heightening Western animosity toward Putin.

Obama's Secrets

But whatever your preferred scenario whether you think the Russians or the Ukrainians did it the solution to the mystery could clearly benefit from President Barack Obama doing what Putin has done: declassify relevant intelligence and defense information.

One might think that the Times' editors would be at the forefront of demanding transparency from the U.S. government, especially since senior U.S. officials rushed out of the gate in the days after the tragedy to put the blame on the Russians. Yet, since five days after the shoot-down, the Obama administration has refused to update or refine its claims.

Earlier this year, a spokesperson for Director for National Intelligence James Clapper told me that the DNI would not provide additional information out of concern that it might influence the Dutch investigation, a claim that lacked credibility because the Dutch investigation began within a day of the MH-17 crash and the DNI issued a sketchy white paper on the case four days later.

In other words, the initial U.S. rush to judgment already had prejudiced the investigation by indicating which way the United States, a NATO ally of the Netherlands, wanted the inquiry to go: blame the Russians. Later, withholding more refined intelligence data also concealed whatever contrary analyses had evolved within the U.S. intelligence community after Kerry and the

DNI had jumped to their hasty conclusions.

Yet, The New York Times took note of none of that, simply piling on the Russians again and hailing a dubious online publication called Bellingcat, which has consistently taken whatever the U.S. propaganda line is on international incidents and has systematically screwed up key facts.

In 2013, Bellingcat's founder Eliot Higgins got the firing location wrong for the sarin gas attack outside Damascus, Syria. He foisted the blame on Bashar al-Assad's forces in line with U.S. propaganda but it turned out that the missile's range was way too short for his analysis to be correct. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case.](#)"]

Then, earlier this year, Higgins fed Australia's "60 Minutes" program wrong coordinates for the location of the so-called "Buk-getaway video" in eastern Ukraine. Though the program treated Higgins's analysis as gospel, the images from the video and from the supposed location clearly didn't match, leading the program to engage in a journalistic fraud to pretend otherwise. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Reckless Stand-upper on MH-17.](#)"]

But the Times' editorial board simply gushed all over Bellingcat, promoting the Web site as if it's a credible source, writing that the Dutch report "is consistent with theories advanced by the United States and Ukraine as well as evidence collected by the independent investigative website Bellingcat.com, which hold that the fatal missile was fired from territory controlled by Russian-backed rebels in eastern Ukraine."

The Times then distorted the findings of the Buk manufacturer to present them as somehow contradicted by the Dutch report, which substantially relied on the declassified information from the manufacturer to reach roughly the same conclusion, that the missile was an older-model Buk.

However, without irony, the Times writes, "This fact is not something Russians are likely to learn; Russian television has presented only the Kremlin's disinformation of what is going on in Ukraine and, for that matter, Syria. Creating an alternative reality has been a big reason for President Vladimir Putin's boundless popularity among Russians. He sees no reason to come clean for the shooting down of the Boeing 777."

Yet, the actual reality is that Russia has provided much more information and shown much greater transparency than President Obama and the U.S. government have. The Dutch report also ignored one of the key questions asked by Russian authorities in the days after the MH-17 shoot-down: why did Ukraine's air defense turn on the radar used to guide Buk missiles?

But the Times remains wedded to its propaganda narrative and doesn't want inconvenient facts to get in the way. Rather than demand that Obama "come clean" about what the U.S. intelligence agencies know about the MH-17 case, the newspaper of record chooses to mislead its readers about the facts.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

Explaining Myself

Exclusive: U.S. government propagandists know that the best way to get Americans to support a war is to get them despising and laughing at some "designated villain," though the technique applies to more mundane cases, too. That's when journalists should step in but often they just pile on, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In my four decades in national journalism I started at the Associated Press in 1974 I have grown increasingly concerned about how Americans respond to information, or put differently, how propagandists package their messaging to elicit the desired response. In an age of cynicism, the trick is to get the "big ha-ha!" convincing you to laugh at the target whether deserved or not.

The way the process works is to first generate hatred or contempt toward a person or group and then produce "themes" that make the target a subject of ridicule and derision, demonized to such an extent that pretty much anything goes. Some of this behavior might seem relatively harmless but it can lead to serious unfairness, injustice, even war.

In 2000, I took heat from some colleagues for objecting to the "big ha-ha!" being directed at Vice President Al Gore. It had reached the point where the mainstream media even made up fictional quotes to put in Gore's mouth like "I invented the Internet" so he could be mocked in favor of the much cooler George W. Bush, who rewarded favored journalists with pet nicknames.

This media hazing of wonky Al Gore carried over to the election in which Gore not only won the national popular vote but if all legal ballots in Florida had

been counted, he would have carried that swing state and thus won the White House. But the mainstream U.S. media acted as if the idea of counting the votes and thus denying Bush the presidency was somehow dirty pool.

Very quickly, the conventional wisdom solidified behind the idea that Gore was a "sore loser" who should just get out of the way. That prevailing attitude created political space for five Republican justices on the U.S. Supreme Court to halt the counting of votes in Florida, giving the state and the White House to George W. Bush. The conventional wisdom quickly morphed into the conviction that the media had to protect Bush's "legitimacy."

The consequences of that shoddy and biased journalism are hard to quantify. History might have gone off in a much less bloody direction if the U.S. media big shots had stuck up for the basic idea that the American voters should decide who becomes president. But it was so much easier for everyone to go with the flow. Al Gore was such a stiff. Ha-ha! [For details, see [Neck Deep](#).]

Reagan's World

By 2000, I had already seen this pattern take shape and take control of American journalism. President Ronald Reagan and his skilled team of propagandists were masters at shaping the narrative and, via the media, convincing Americans that impoverished peasants in Central America were a grave threat to the United States and thus needed to be repressed.

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega became "the dictator in designer glasses" and Sandinista-ruled Nicaragua was "a totalitarian dungeon." Conversely, U.S. allies no matter how corrupt and cruel were placed on a pedestal. The cocaine-tainted Nicaraguan Contras were the "moral equal of the Founding Fathers." The blood-soaked dictator of Guatemala Efraín Ríos Montt was a good Christian getting "a bum rap." [See Consortiumnews.com's ["The Victory of Perception Management"](#).]

As the years went by, each international crisis became a replay. Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein was "worse than Hitler." His troops pulled new-born infants out of incubators and smashed them to the floor. Today, it's Russian President Vladimir Putin riding shirtless. What a macho jerk! Ha-ha!

So, when "white papers" or other government reports detail the offenses of these reviled leaders, who inside the mainstream U.S. media would risk his or her career by checking out the facts and challenging the accusations?

Indeed, you could build your career by going along, maybe becoming the "star reporter" who gets the latest approved "leak" from the U.S. intelligence community "confirming" how terrible the designated villain is. Or you could portray yourself as a "citizen journalist" and use Internet research to

vindicate exactly what the U.S. government was claiming. Maybe a mainstream job or a U.S. AID grant awaits.

But I opted out of that game. For many years, I battled inside mainstream news organizations the AP, Newsweek and PBS Frontline trying to get reluctant, hostile or frightened editors to challenge the U.S. government's propaganda as well as the media's conventional wisdom. Eventually, I turned to the Internet and founded a Web site, which became Consortiumnews.com.

My job as I saw it was to do what I thought journalism was always supposed to do, i.e., look skeptically at whatever any government or powerful institution claimed to be true. I felt this was particularly important during international crises that carried the potential of war or in the current case of Ukraine the possibility of exterminating all life on the planet.

That doesn't mean that governments and powerful institutions always lie. But it should mean that journalists demand hard facts and evidence before accepting what they're told. Sadly, that attitude has become rare as the years have gone by.

It's now almost expected that the New York Times and Washington Post will march in lockstep with the U.S. government on foreign policy, except perhaps when they bait a leader who shows some geopolitical restraint and doesn't swagger aggressively into an international conflict. It also goes without saying that mainstream journalists are virtually immune from accountability if they run with the pack and later turn out to be wrong even if a catastrophic war is the result.

Yet, despite the depths that journalism has reached in the United States and across the Western world, I still believe in its principles. Indeed, the only ism that I do believe in is journalism, which you might define as the assembling of facts within a framework of common sense and presented in a way that the average person can understand.

But I especially don't like the piling-on "ha-ha" tendencies of today's media. Whenever someone gets demonized and that demonization influences how information is handled, that's where the worst violations of journalistic principles usually occur.

Recently, I've applied that skepticism in evaluating claims about Russian guilt in the 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 from British blogger Eliot Higgins and Australia's "60 Minutes" or in assessing the extravagant accusations about the Ukraine crisis from U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power.

But the same journalistic principles apply in more mundane matters like the NFL's harsh punishment of New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady in the overblown "Deflategate" case. Many Americans hate Brady and the Patriots, creating an atmosphere in which accusations are readily accepted even if the evidence is weak or manipulated.

While I would argue that my journalism is consistent in this way, I know it tends to offend people who have reached contrary conclusions and don't want to rethink them or others who have a stake in the conventional wisdom. Then, I usually get accused of being someone's apologist a "Sandinista apologist"; an "Al Gore apologist"; a "Saddam apologist"; a "Putin apologist"; or a "Brady apologist."

But it's really that I just don't like the "big ha-ha!"

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A Reckless 'Stand-upper' on MH-17

Exclusive: Australia's "60 Minutes" claimed to do an investigative report proving the anti-aircraft battery that shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 last July fled into Russia and pinning the atrocity on Russian President Putin. But the news show did a meaningless "stand-upper," not an investigation, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In TV journalism, there's a difference between doing a "stand-upper" and doing an investigative report, although apparently Australia's "60 Minutes" doesn't understand the distinction. A "stand-upper" is the TV practice of rushing a correspondent to a scene to read some prepared script or state some preordained conclusion. An investigation calls for checking out facts and testing out assumptions.

That investigative component is especially important if you're preparing to accuse someone of a heinous crime, say, mass murder, even if the accused is a

demonized figure like Russian President Vladimir Putin. Such charges should not be cast about casually. Indeed, it is the job of journalists to show skepticism in the face of these sorts of accusations. In the case of Russia, there's the other possible complication that biased journalism and over-the-top propaganda could contribute to a nuclear showdown.

We are still living with the catastrophe of the mainstream media going with the flow of false claims about Saddam Hussein and Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Now many of the same media outlets are parroting similar propaganda aimed at Russia without demonstrating independence and asking tough questions although the consequences now could be even more catastrophic.

That is the context of my criticism of Australia's "60 Minutes" handling of the key video evidence supposedly implicating Russia and Putin in the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine. It is apparent from the show's original, much-hyped presentation and a three-minute-plus follow-up that the show and its correspondent Michael Usher failed to check out the facts surrounding an amateur video allegedly showing a BUK anti-aircraft missile battery missing one missile after the MH-17 shoot-down.

In the days following that tragedy, killing 298 people, Ukrainian government officials promoted the video on social media as supposedly showing the BUK battery making its getaway past a billboard in Krasnodon, a town southeast of Luhansk, allegedly en route toward Russia. That claim primarily came from Ukraine's Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, considered one of the regime's most right-wing figures who rose to power after a U.S.-back coup in February 2014.

From a journalistic standpoint, Avakov and the other Kiev authorities should have been considered biased observers. Indeed, they were among the possible suspects for the shoot-down. Moreover, the Russian government placed the video's billboard in the town of Krasnoarmiisk, northwest of Donetsk and then under Ukrainian government control. To support that claim, the Russians cited a local address on the billboard.

Further, the German intelligence agency, the BND, has challenged some of the images provided by the Ukrainian government as "manipulated," according to a report in Der Spiegel, which added that the BND had concluded that the eastern Ukrainian rebels had obtained the BUK missile battery not from Russia but by capturing it from Ukrainian government stockpiles. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Germans Clear Russia in MH-17 Case."]

While it's not clear which images the BND had debunked, this reference to the Kiev regime's alleged manipulation of photos should have added another layer of doubt for the sleuths from Australia's "60 Minutes."

Yet, based on what “60 Minutes” has revealed about its recent “investigation,” Usher displayed little skepticism. He consulted with British blogger Eliot Higgins to get a traffic-camera shot and coordinates of an intersection in the Luhansk area showing several billboards, which Higgins suspected was the location of the “getaway” video.

So, by traveling to Luhansk, Usher and his crew could have performed an important function by matching up the shot from the video with the scene of the intersection, either confirming or dismissing the hypothesis.

In the initial program, you see the “60 Minutes” team doing exactly that on some videos of lesser significance by superimposing some of its own shots over amateur footage. However, when it came to the key piece of evidence the “getaway” video the program deviated from that pattern. Instead of matching anything up, Usher just did a “stand-upper” in front of one of the billboards.

Usher boldly accused the Russians of lying about the location of the billboard and asserted that he and his team had found the real location. Usher gestured to the billboards on the intersection in rebel-controlled Luhansk. He then accused Putin of responsibility for the 298 deaths.

But none of Usher’s images matched up with the “getaway” video. The scene in the video was clearly different from the scene shown by Usher. After several people sent me the segment on Australia’s “60 Minutes,” I watched it and wrote an article noting the obvious problems in the scene as presented.

My point was not to say where the video was shot. As far as I know, it might even have been shot in Luhansk. My point was that Usher and his team had failed to do their investigative duty to verify the location as precisely as possible. Under principles of English-based law – and of Western journalism – there is a presumption of innocence until sufficiently corroborated evidence is presented. The burden of proof rests on the prosecutors or, in this case, the journalists. It’s not enough to guess at these things.

But Usher and his team treated their job like they were just doing a “stand-upper” putting Usher in front of some billboards in Luhansk to deliver his conclusions (or those of Higgins) not as an investigative assignment, which would have skeptically examined the assumptions behind citing that location as the scene in the video.

Usher offered no details about how he and his team had reached their conclusion on where the video was shot beyond referencing their meetings with blogger Higgins, who operates out of a house in Leicester, England.

Though there was no dispute that the images of the “getaway” video and Usher’s

“stand-upper” didn’t match, an irate “60 Minutes” producer released a statement denouncing me and defending the show. The statement did, however, acknowledge that the team had not tried to replicate the scene in the “getaway” video, saying:

“We opted to do our piece to camera as a wide shot showing the whole road system so the audience could get the layout and see which way the Buk was heading. The background in our piece to camera looks different to the original Buk video simply because it was shot from a different angle. The original video was obviously shot from one of the apartments behind, through the trees, which in summer were in full leaf.”

Those claims, however, were more excuses than real arguments. The wide shot did nothing to help Australian viewers get a meaningful sense of the “layout” in Luhansk. There was also no map or other graphic that could have shown where the apartments were and how that would have explained the dramatic discrepancies between the “getaway” video and the “wide shot.”

After the public statement, there were other rumblings that I would be further put down in a follow-up that “60 Minutes” was preparing. I thought the update might present out-takes of the crew seeking access to the apartments or at least lining up a shot from that angle as best they could you know, investigative stuff.

Instead, when the update aired, it consisted of more insults references to “Kremlin stooges” and “Russian puppets” and a reprise of earlier parts of the program that I had not disputed. When the update finally got to the key “getaway” scene, Usher went into full bluster mode but again failed to present any serious evidence that his crew had matched up anything from the original video to what was found in Luhansk.

First, Usher pulled a sleight of hand by showing a traffic-camera shot of the intersection apparently supplied by Higgins and then matching up those landmarks to show that the crew had found the same intersection. But that is irrelevant to the question of whether the “getaway” video was taken in that intersection. In other words, Usher was trying to fool his audience by mixing together two different issues.

Sure, Usher and his team had found the intersection picked out by Higgins as the possible scene, but so what? The challenge was to match up landmarks from the “getaway” video to that intersection. On that point, Usher cited only one item, a non-descript utility pole that Usher claimed looked like a utility pole in the “getaway” video.

However, the problems with that claim were multiple. First, utility poles tend to look alike and these two appear to have some differences though it's hard to tell from the grainy "getaway" video. But what's not hard to tell is that the surroundings are almost entirely different. The pole in the "getaway" video has a great deal of vegetation to its right while Usher's pole doesn't.

And then there's the case of the missing house. The one notable landmark in that section of the "getaway" video is a house to the pole's left. That house does not appear in Usher's video, although "60 Minutes" partially obscured the spot where the house should be by inserting an inset, thus adding to a viewer's confusion.

Yet, one has to think that if Usher's crew had found the house or for that matter, anything besides a utility pole that looked like something from the video they would have highlighted it.

Some of the show's defenders are now saying that the pole was shot from a different angle, too, so it's not fair for me to say it doesn't line up. But, again, that's not the point. It's "60 Minutes" that is making an accusation of mass murder, so it has the responsibility to present meaningful evidence to support that charge. It can't start whining because someone notes that its evidence is faulty or non-existent.

So, here's the problem: As angry as "60 Minutes" is with me for noting the flaws in its report, it was Usher's job to check out whether the "getaway" video matched with the intersection identified by Higgins as the possible scene in Luhansk. Based on what was shown in the first show and then in the update, Usher's team failed miserably.

That, however, doesn't mean that the video wasn't shot someplace nearby or somewhere completely different. It just means that Usher and his producers performed irresponsibly.

I recall once when I was a young Associated Press reporter in Providence, Rhode Island, I did a routine police story by calling authorities in a town elsewhere in the state. My dispatch then was sent out to AP member newspapers and broadcast outlets in Rhode Island. That night, when I got home, I turned on the 11 o'clock news and noticed a local TV correspondent reporting from the town on the same story.

I paid close attention in case he had found something that I had missed. But the correspondent simply read the AP dispatch, exactly as I had written it. He had done a "stand-upper," using the town as simply a visual backdrop. There was nothing wrong with that; he had every right to read the AP copy.

The difference in the case of Usher and “60 Minutes” is that they were presenting their work as an original investigation, not simply a “stand-upper” of a report done by an English blogger. As an investigative report, they should have done all they could to check out and, either, verify or disprove the blogger’s findings.

Instead, on the most important point in dispute one that could push the world closer to a nuclear confrontation and conceivably annihilation Usher and his show traveled halfway around the world to do a “stand-upper.”

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