



Just Enough Alarm: *GlobalPost* and the Syrian Chemical Attack Story

Teaching Note

Case Summary

On April 30, 2013, the *GlobalPost* (GP)—a four-year-old online foreign news organization—had in hand a story of potentially global consequence. Senior correspondent Tracey Shelton had spent a week investigating accounts of an alleged chemical weapons attack in Syria. She had visited the site and obtained first-hand interviews with those who had treated the victims from the Aleppo neighborhood of Skeikh Maqsoud. Three people had died onsite, and another in the wake of the attack; tens were hospitalized. On April 28, Shelton filed a story, plus powerful video and photographs, to her editors at GP.

In August 2012, US President Barack Obama had drawn a “red line” for US involvement in the escalating civil war between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and groups of rebels bent on toppling him. “We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus,” said Obama.¹ Since August, the world had been waiting for evidence of chemical warfare; the rebels even had reason to welcome it, if it meant US aid. When Shelton filed her story, it seemed possible that the Sheikh Maqsoud attack crossed that line.

But GP Editor Thomas Mucha, Senior Editor David Case and Middle East Editor Peter Gelling had enlisted experts to help determine what kind of attack it was. If it was sarin gas, for example, it crossed the line; if something weaker, the consequences were less obvious. The experts confirmed that the symptoms Shelton described did not correspond to those caused by sarin. However, it was clearly a chemical attack. The case ends with the editors debating how to handle the story in a way that faithfully reflected the experience of the Syrians under attack, while taking care not to exaggerate the incident.

¹ Press release, “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” August 20, 2012. See: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>

This Teaching Note was written by Kirsten Lundberg, Director, for the Case Consortium @ Columbia. The faculty sponsor was Prof. Ann Cooper at the Graduate School of Journalism. (0115)

Copyright © 2015 The Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York. No part of this publication may be reproduced, revised, translated, stored in a retrieval system, used in a spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the written permission of the Case Consortium.

The case also describes in detail what it takes to report in a country closed to foreign journalists; what it means to sneak across a border to interview and follow rebel groups; how a reporter builds trust and navigates safely in such circumstances; and how useful citizen reports and/or videos are to news organizations. The sense of peril for Shelton was heightened by the kidnapping and disappearance of her GP colleague James Foley in November 2012.

Teaching Objectives

This case is useful both for its nitty-gritty depiction of reporting on civil war, and for its portrait of how editors provide context and fact-checking for the stories reporters send in. Consider first the job of a war correspondent. The character of Tracey Shelton is an interesting one. Ask students to consider what inspired her to take up international reporting, and conflict reporting in particular. We don't know much about her upbringing, but we do know she never went to university (though she did eventually earn a master's degree). Was she naïve or informed about her career selection? Can students imagine themselves acting as she does?

What, if anything, changed for Shelton after she was attacked in Benghazi? Ask students how they might have reacted in a similar situation. Shelton cultivated relationships with rebels both in Libya and Syria. Ask what allowed her to trust them, and vice versa. Is she being used? Are there useful rules for reporting from rebel-held territory during a civil war? List some on board. Consider whether what worked for Shelton in Libya was also useful in Syria.

Shelton expresses some caution about the locals she relies on while on assignment. For example, she has learned to be careful in accepting rides. Describe her code (e.g. ride with groups, not individuals; go with your instinct) and whether it would be effective for others. Has Shelton developed an exemplary survival mode for conflict journalism, or is she relying on luck? To succeed in such reporting clearly requires a fortuitous blend of personality, intelligence, appetite for risk, training and experience. How might one prepare for an assignment in a conflict zone?

When Shelton first hears about it, the story from Sheikh Maqsoud seems to be one for the history books. As she checks into it, however, she begins to have doubts about whether this is a "red line" attack. What conflicting principles weigh on a news organization that may be onto a very big story? Consider competition, accuracy, reputation, fidelity to local sources and so forth. Does speed matter in such a situation? What is the trade-off with thoroughness? Sometimes stories prove less momentous than expected. Consider how editors and reporters should handle such a story if the reporting was also dangerous—e.g the journalist risked his life or even died.

The *GlobalPost* editors, Mucha and Gelling, have as much riding on the story as Shelton. Could GP have published the story as it was first prepared by Gelling, based solely on Shelton's reporting? Why or why not? It was a thoroughly reported piece, backed up by video and photographic evidence. It featured on-the-ground interviews and gave locals' view of what had

occurred. Could GP have justified the early version as a description of near-daily reality in Syria—and declared that it was up to readers to decide for themselves whether the attack crossed Obama’s red line? Or does a news organization have an obligation to interpret, or seek expert interpretation of, evidence for readers?

How might you define the role of editor versus the role of reporter? What about when the reporter is alone in getting a story? Editors cannot know what the reporter has experienced, but at the same time are responsible for what gets published. What constitutes responsible editing of an exclusive? Should Shelton be upset at the changes made to her story? Should Gelling’s byline go on whatever story GP chooses to publish about the Sheikh Maqsoud incident? Why or why not?

Citizen journalism. The case also raises for discussion the responsible use of reports by civilians from conflict zones. What should news organizations do with such material? Sometimes Western news organizations are banned from war zones, or highly restricted by the government. Should news organizations as a result report nothing, or can they publish material found online or submitted by citizens? Are there different standards for publishing print accounts versus video or photographs? What might such standards look like?

The case provides one example of successful citizen journalism—the video of Col. Gadaffy’s capture and death. What, if anything, makes that footage different from the video that some news organizations published of “Syrian” (in reality, Lebanese) soldiers beating demonstrators? In Sheikh Maqsoud, Shelton obtains video allegedly of the results of the recent chemical weapons attack. Is she justified in believing the video authentic?

Finally, there was the awareness by all involved that this attack might prove historic. Did that knowledge change the typical editorial process? Should it have? Did the example of Iraq, which the US invaded fully 10 years earlier partly based on reports of weapons of mass destruction, influence decisionmaking? In the world of 24-hour news cycles, why not report what is known and amplify with other facts as they become available? Ask students whether there is any need to wait until a story is “complete.”

Class Plan

Use this case in a course/class on reporting in conflict zones; international journalism; editorial management or ethics.

Pre-class. Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

1. How will *GlobalPost* editors know when the story of the Sheikh Maqsoud attack is ready to publish?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class, and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class questions: The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) Write a sample headline for the story that *GlobalPost* has. Then write a headline for the story Shelton first thought she had. How do they differ and does it matter?

b) Shelton's career path has been unorthodox. What would you adopt from her example? What might she have done differently?

c) When reporting from a war zone, what rules can help keep a reporter safe? Is a female reporter in any greater danger than a male? Was Shelton?

d) Syria's was one of the first wars to generate a great deal of citizen journalism—print, video and photographs. Under what conditions, if any, should a news organization publish such material?

e) In 2012, the US President drew a line in the sand. When governments issue ultimatums, what is the role of the press—to seek evidence that the line has been crossed or leave that to the authorities?

f) Journalists often depend on locals to give them information. Are the dynamics any different in a war zone than in reporting other stories? How does Shelton manage her relations with locals? Is hers a model to follow?

g) What is the role/responsibility of GP editors in shepherding Shelton's story to publication? How does it differ from Shelton's role/responsibility? Should Gelling share the byline?

h) *GlobalPost* is a fairly young news organization. Breaking a story of global significance would enormously enhance its repute. Does this influence its decisionmaking in the Sheikh Maqsoud story?

i) Jim Foley had been held by kidnappers for five months when Shelton reported this story. Should *GlobalPost* have allowed her to go to Syria at all? Why or why not?

j) The US media seems to have been keenly aware in 2013 of its failure in 2003 to report fully on Iraq's presumed weapons of mass destruction. Is the precedent relevant?

Suggested Readings

Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect*. (Prometheus Books, 2014).

SYNOPSIS: This book was published in October 2014, more than a year after the end-date of the case. But it provides good background about the Syrian conflict for those who want to better understand how it arose and why it persists. Erlich is a journalist whose experience includes parallels to, but also important differences from, Shelton's.

<http://www.randomhouse.com/book/240663/inside-syria-by-reese-erlich>

John Mueller, "Erase the Red Line," April 30, 2013 and Målfrid Braut-Hegghammer, "Red Lines Matter," May 7, 2012, *Foreign Affairs*.

SYNOPSIS: These two *Foreign Affairs* articles, published a week apart, make the case respectively against and for issuing an ultimatum about chemical weapons use. It provides some context and background for the decision that *GlobalPost* editors confronted: was the Sheikh Maqoud attack one that involved the kind of chemical weapons President Obama would not tolerate? Mueller argues that chemical weapons use should not trigger a US response; Braut-Hegghammer says they should.

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139351/john-mueller/erase-the-red-line> and

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139369/malfrid-braut-hegghammer/red-lines-matter>

Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons website: history and definition

SYNOPSIS: The website for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons provides excellent background material about the evolution of an international legal framework for chemical weapons use, as well as definitions of just what constitutes a chemical weapon. It also has a copy of the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention, which can be downloaded.

<http://www.opcw.org/chemical-weapons-convention/genesis-and-historical-development/>
and <http://www.opcw.org/about-chemical-weapons/what-is-a-chemical-weapon/>

Francesca Bori, "Woman's Work," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July 1, 2013.

SYNOPSIS: This article by an Italian freelancer gives one point of view about the thankless task of reporting from a war zone as a freelancer. Students might benefit from comparing Bori's views of her work to those of Tracey Shelton. Bori wrote it soon after the end-date of the case study.

http://www.cjr.org/feature/womans_work.php?page=all

Ed Caesar, "Shooting the messengers," *GQ Britain*, August 22, 2014.

SYNOPSIS: This long, moving and introspective article came a year after Shelton was in Syria. It's a rumination on covering war. It provides readers with an overview of why reporters, videographers and photographers choose to go to war zones, details the costs and raises the question of whether the rewards merit the sacrifices. Filmmaker and reporter Sebastian Junger (*Restrepo*) is front and center, but mention is made of many recent heroic reporters, some who lived and some who died.

<http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/comment/articles/2013-07/09/war-reporting/viewall>

Maria Maniati, "War Reporting: Hope for the best, prepare for the worst," *Safety Management*, December 2013/January 2014.

SYNOPSIS: This factual account by a researcher for the British Safety Council takes a measured look at the practicalities of reporting from conflict areas. With a focus on the BBC, it describes what kind of hostile environment training is available to journalists, and what kind of counseling can be accessed after returning from a traumatic event.

http://www.academia.edu/5476974/Journalists_safety_when_reporting_from_war_zones