



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

In spring 2013, the world was alert to the possibility that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad might use chemical weapons to subdue the rebels with whom for two years he had fought a devastating civil war. Syria had admitted it had chemical weapons: blister agents, mustard gas, sarin, and VX nerve agent. Even without their use, the war by April 2013 had cost over 70,000 lives—at least half civilians—and created 800,000 refugees.

Al-Assad was on notice that the global community would not sit idly by were chemical weapons detonated. On August 20, 2012, US President Barack Obama had warned that chemical weapons constituted a “red line”: their use would trigger a major, if unspecified, response from the US and presumably its allies. For al-Assad, chemical weapons might indeed deliver victory. But counter-intuitively, his opponents also had reason to hope he crossed the “red line” because that would mean US assistance. Since December 2012, there had been a rising crescendo of unsubstantiated charges of just such chemical attacks.

It was in this atmosphere that *GlobalPost* (GP) Senior Correspondent Tracey Shelton crossed back into Syria on April 15 [chk]. The Australian-born reporter had covered the war since February 2012. Friends in Aleppo immediately told her there had been a chemical attack the previous day, in the neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud. Shelton walked there to check it out. What she found prompted her to contact GP: she might have stumbled onto the kind of chemical attack President Obama had in mind.

Over the next two weeks, Shelton located and visited the site of the attack, and traveled to a nearby city to interview hospital personnel who had tended to the dead and wounded. She collected photos and video and interviewed witnesses. But by the time she filed on April 28, she was no longer sure just what the story was. Locals were convinced it was a sarin attack; she was less certain.

Shelton’s editors checked with weapons experts to help determine what exactly she had uncovered. The US media was all too aware that President George W. Bush had ordered a 2003 attack on Iraq based on claims, later proved baseless, that dictator Saddam Hussein had a battle-ready arsenal of biological and chemical weapons. Critics had subsequently pointed to the failure of the press to challenge the government’s assertions. In 2013, GP’s editors were mindful of Obama’s “red line” and the potential consequences of a news report that declared it crossed.

By Tuesday, April 30, the GP editors were convinced that Sheikh Maqsoud had not suffered a sarin attack. But it had experienced an attack with a chemical; several people had died and others were severely affected by it. *GlobalPost* was still new, in business only since October 2008 and resolved to build a reputation for credibility. How could it convey simultaneously what Shelton had discovered, what the locals had experienced, and what the experts had concluded? How should it report on a chemical attack that had not been the worst-case scenario?

***GlobalPost*—a new entry**

GlobalPost was born as a response to the shuttering of overseas bureaus by major US news organizations. The Internet had cut into traditional revenue streams and many news outlets had been obliged to close some or all of their foreign operations. Philip S. Balboni had recently stepped down as president of the Boston-based cable news channel he founded, New England Cable News. Charles Sennott was a longtime foreign correspondent for the *Boston Globe*. Together, they conceived of *GlobalPost*, an online-only international news company, to fill the gap.

Balboni and Sennott set up shop in April 2008 in a renovated waterfront building in Boston. Balboni was president and CEO; Sennott vice president and executive editor. The website went live on January 12, 2009. *GlobalPost*'s goal, as the mission statement put it, was "to help fill the enormous void that has grown up in coverage of the world by US news organizations. More than ever before in history, we need knowledge of other countries and of the global forces that are impacting our economy, our environment, and our very security."¹ It pledged to maintain traditional US standards of journalistic impartiality, and that its reports would be "fair, intelligent, comprehensive and free of partisanship." It continued:

GlobalPost follows no political line. We encourage our correspondents to write with a strong voice and to work hard to unearth facts. But we leave opinion on the opinion pages.

Over time, Sennott built a team of Boston-based editors (eventually 10-12) and more than 70 correspondents in 50 countries. At first, *GlobalPost* used freelancers. But the freelancer model proved difficult: there was high turnover, which meant limited opportunity to build relationships with contributors; and editors could not easily assess the trustworthiness of submitted articles. The pay scale was low: about \$250 per article. Typically, GP paid a freelancer \$1,000 a month for four stories, but it was not a retainer: if s/he filed only three, the payment would be \$750. No freelancer contributed principally to GP because that was not enough income to live on.

So in 2010, GP modified its approach. As a first step, it increased the per-story fee. It also designated seven contributors as "senior correspondent."² Those individuals filed principally for GP, and were paid on average \$50,000 a year. By early 2013, GP had 13 senior contributors around the world, and about 50 so-called "network correspondents." It still accepted contributions on a limited basis from some 100-120 freelancers a month. The writers reported to five geographic desks: Middle

¹ See: <http://www.globalpost.com/mission/mission-statement>

² The seven were based in Afghanistan, Russia, India, Brazil, China, Kenya and Thailand.

East, Africa, Asia-Pacific, the Americas, and Europe. Story categories were business, politics, culture, the environment and war.

The editorial management structure was notably flat.³ Thomas Mucha was hired in October 2008 as managing editor. In November 2010, he was promoted to editor (assuming Sennott's daily editorial responsibilities). With a background in international business economics, Mucha had worked in television as well as at magazines before joining GP. There was also a managing editor, a video producer, an editor for each regional desk, and a couple of deputy editors. The regional editors were the point of contact for reporters in the field. But the newsroom was small and editors sat near one another. All could—and did—confer easily with the group. "For quality control, we try to put as many eyeballs on [copy] as possible," says Mucha. "It's a very inclusive environment here, a roll-up-your-sleeves kind of place."⁴

On the business side, GP's website traffic grew steadily: in 2011, it attracted more than 20 million unique visitors, double the number in 2010; by 2012, that number was nearing 3 million a month, or 36 million a year.⁵ Its revenue—which the privately held company kept confidential—came from advertisements on the website, subscriptions, and syndicated products. It formed affiliate relationships with traditional news organizations, from CBS News to the PBS NewsHour and NPR. It also provided content to US and international newspapers and magazines.

Conflict. To send a GP reporter into a conflict situation required sign-off by several individuals. Usually, the correspondent proposed a reporting trip to the regional editor. That editor would take it to the managing editor, who would discuss it with Mucha or even with Balboni. "It could go to five people," comments Mucha.

GP provided hazard training to those reporting from war zones. They were also given protective gear as needed, from flak jackets to gas masks. GP also required that the reporters on assignment in conflict areas check in regularly—usually twice a day. This could mean a phone call, email or text. GP also made it a policy not to accept stories from unknown writers in conflict zones because it realized it had created a perverse incentive for reporters to go into danger. Explains Middle East Editor Peter Gelling: "We were signaling to freelancers that if they get into Syria and out alive, they can potentially sell us stories, and we didn't want to encourage that."⁶ Adds Mucha:

We don't take stories from people in conflict zones that we don't know and haven't sent in and aren't working with closely... We take responsibility for our people.

³ See Appendix 1 for an editorial list.

⁴ Author's telephone interview with Thomas Mucha on October 15, 2014. All further quotes from Mucha, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

⁵ Ken Doctor, "The newsonomics of big and little, from NBC News and GlobalPost to Thunderdome," *Nieman Lab*, August 29, 2013. See: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2013/08/the-newsonomics-of-big-and-little-from-nbc-news-and-globalpost-to-thunderdome/>

⁶ Author's interview with Peter Gelling on September 22, 2014, in Boston. All further quotes from Gelling, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

An accidental reporter

One of the reporters on the *GlobalPost* team was Tracey Shelton. Shelton had grown up on a sheep farm in Darraweit Guim in the southeastern Australian state of Victoria. When she graduated from high school, “I wanted to be an aid worker and save the world.”⁷ So she moved to Cambodia and volunteered at an orphanage. Within a year, however, she was disillusioned. “I realized how arrogant that attitude is, of sitting in Australia going ‘I’m white, and I’m educated. I’m going to save the world,’” she says.

She quit and, in 2005, began freelancing as a photographer and journalist. Journalism made sense to her. “I used to travel all the time and be really fascinated by everything, and chat with everybody and ask lots of questions. I eventually realized that yeah, that’s kind of like being a journalist,” she observes. In 2008, she became the photo editor for Cambodia’s *Post Media*, managing print photography for the *Phnom Penh Post*, *Post Khmer*, *Seven Days* magazine and other properties. Under her, the *Post*’s photo department won several awards.⁸ Besides photography, Shelton developed skills in print reporting and video.

By mid-2009, however, she was restless and ready to leave Cambodia. She wanted to go to Africa, but had never been to the Middle East and thought “I might as well go check it out on my way to Africa. I just loved it, and I started traveling around.” She tried her hand again at freelancing, and before long settled in Iraq—where she stayed for 18 months. In 2009, US military forces were starting to withdraw from Iraq after six years; the simmering conflict remained a subject of interest worldwide. She filed stories for, among others, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The National* (Abu Dhabi) and *Rudaw* (Kurdish media). She also became a contributor to *GlobalPost*.

Shelton was able to deliver material across platforms—as a writer, photographer and multimedia producer. She also started to pick up Arabic (she later developed a Libyan accent, but could understand Syrian and Iraqi Arabic as well). Eventually, she could manage informal conversations and travel on her own, but she always looked for an interpreter for interviews.

Arab Spring. By late 2010, Shelton was ready to resume her travel to Africa—but what became known as the Arab Spring started unfolding with the self-immolation of a street vendor in Tunisia on December 17. In February 2011, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resigned under the pressure of public protests. In neighboring Libya, demonstrations began against strongman Moammar Gaddafi. Within weeks, the protests had evolved into a civil war.

In May 2011, Shelton decided to go to Libya under a freelance arraignment with *The National*. She fell in love with the country and decided to stay. She set herself up in the rebel-controlled city of Misrata, and traveled frequently to Benghazi, where the anti-Gaddafi uprising began. On August 11, she was in a Benghazi hotel room when two armed men broke in at 3 a.m., tied her, beat her and said

⁷ Author’s interview with Tracey Shelton via Skype on October 2, 2014. All further quotes from Shelton, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

⁸ It won the Society of Publishers in Asia award for excellence in news photography, and the 2009 World Association of Newspapers-IFRA multimedia award. See: www.globalpost.com/bio/tracey-shelton

they would kidnap her.⁹ Shelton managed to free her hands and feet and escaped by jumping to a neighboring balcony. Rebels told her the assailants were Gaddafi infiltrators, though there was no confirmation. The attack, says Shelton, “made me a lot stronger.”

At that point, I wasn’t doing great with the freelancing. I was in a little bit of a funk, because people weren’t interested in Libya any more... I was actually considering leaving Libya, doing something else and coming back. But after that happened, I was determined to stay.

The assailants had stolen all her gear; she had no laptop, no camera and no money. Friends told her to go home. “But that didn’t make any sense to me, because I hadn’t lived in Australia for years. There was nothing there for me. What was I going to do? Stop work, go back and feel sorry for myself?,” she says.

After her beating, the rebels’ National Transitional Council gave her a free room in another Benghazi hotel. The receptionist let her eat for free at the evening buffet (it was the holy month of Ramadan), and allowed her to type stories on the hotel reception computer late at night. “I started getting work immediately after [the attack],” recalls Shelton. “I started going to the front lines.” When she returned to Misrata, still with black eyes from her beating, “everybody looked after me.” One acquaintance loaned her a camera, another a laptop.

In late August 2011, rebel forces captured Tripoli and Gaddafi fled. He was on the run until October 20, when rebels captured and killed him in his hometown of Sirte. That event thrust Shelton into the journalism limelight. On October 20, she got into a car headed for Sirte. But her rebel companions told her it was too dangerous and made her stay with the so-called “backline” fighters holding the rear. “That is the first time they had ever said ‘no’ to me,” she later recalled. “But no one expected Gaddafi to be there.”¹⁰

Later that day, the rebel commander radioed his backline fighters and told them to bring Shelton up: the rebels had captured and killed Gaddafi. Shelton was on the scene within minutes; she started asking if anyone had shot video of the events. One rebel she knew well said he had footage, and offered it to her exclusively. It showed Gaddafi being dragged out of a tunnel, thrown into the back of a truck and killed.

Shelton was certain the video was authentic, and *GlobalPost* published it.¹¹ “There were multiple videos going around. This one was the clearest. We were the first to get it and that whole experience spoke to Tracey’s value and her skill in cultivating sources... He could have sold that for God knows how much money,” recalls *GlobalPost* Editor Gelling. For her reports on the fall of

⁹ “Australian journalist attacked by assailants in Benghazi,” Committee to Protect Journalists, August 22, 2011.

See: <https://cpj.org/2011/08/australian-journalist-attacked-by-assailants-in-be.php>

¹⁰ “Libya frontline exclusive for Tracey,” *The Bolt*, Summer 2012, p.11. See:

<http://www.bolton.ac.uk/MediaCentre/TheBolt/The-Bolt-Summer-2012.pdf>

¹¹ To see the video, click [here](#).

Gadaffi's hometown and his capture, Shelton won the 2012 Overseas Press Club award for best coverage of a breaking news event.

Onward to Syria

By February 2012, however, the Libya story held less interest for the rest of the world, and Shelton took her first trip to Syria. Among other stories, she reported on the treatment of prisoners by rebel groups, and dispatched several video reports on government airstrikes against civilians, frontline tactics and rebel sniper missions. By May, she had made Syria her principal focus.

GlobalPost put her on staff in its category of "senior correspondent." This meant she filed principally for GP, and received a regular salary. It also meant she was subject to their rules: take hostile environment training; consult before traveling to a conflict zone and secure agreement to pursue a story; and contact GP editors at least twice a day to confirm safety. Shelton found an apartment in southern Turkey, just over the border from Syria. But she was rarely there. Most of her time was spent on the road.

Syria had imploded during the 2011 Arab Spring, and settled into a civil war between President al-Assad, whose government cracked down with ever-escalating violence, and rebels led initially by the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA). In February 2012, international attention was focused on regular Syrian army attacks on the city of Homs which killed hundreds of civilians. Over the next several months, an Arab League monitoring mission failed, and a United Nations ceasefire, brokered by envoy Kofi Annan, came to naught as the Syria government prevented access to battlefields or opposition forces.

Shelton, like other Western journalists, tried repeatedly to obtain a visa from the Syrian government but, denied, resorted instead to crossing the border into Syria from Turkey in order to report on rebel activities. A *GlobalPost* colleague, James Foley, was also covering Syria, though the two never covered a story together. The FSA welcomed Western media and was able to provide relatively safe passage to areas of interest. Shelton established a base of sorts in Aleppo, where she stayed with a couple. She had met the husband in early 2012 in Idlib, become friendly with his family, and attended his wedding.

Shelton produced a wide variety of video and print stories, and took photographs.¹² For example, she filed a story in June 2012 from Jabal al-Zawiya on how rebels obtained funds to buy arms. She followed the breakdown of the UN-brokered ceasefire. She wrote about measures the government took against medical workers who treated rebel wounded. "It was rare that she would spend more than two, three weeks at a time in Syria," recalls Gelling. "But there were a few times when she was there for a month maybe."

One of the global community's growing concerns was that President al-Bashar might resort to using chemical weapons that Syria was widely suspected of having. Syria was not a signatory of

¹² For a sampling of Shelton's articles February-early July 2012, see:
<http://www.globalpost.com/bio/Tracey%20Shelton/articles?page=5>

the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention, which outlawed the production, stockpiling or use of chemical weapons. In late July 2012, the Syrian Foreign Ministry for the first time admitted that the country did have chemical weapons. The ministry did not elaborate, but US intelligence reported that Syria had supplies of mustard gas, blister agents, sarin, and VX nerve gas. All could be delivered variously by aerial bombs, ballistic missiles or artillery rockets. On August 20, the London-based International Institute of Strategic Studies confirmed that Syria was stockpiling ballistic missiles, including long-range Scuds.

Red line. That same day, US President Obama warned Syrian President al-Assad not to cross a “red line.” Without stipulating what exactly the consequences would be, Obama said:

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. That would change my equation.¹³

From that day, observers inside and outside Syria were on the lookout for Syrian government use of chemical weapons, especially against civilians. While the Syrian government had no interest in involving the US, the rebels perversely began to hope for such use because it would draw the US into direct participation in the conflict on the rebel side.

Meanwhile, on September 7 Shelton found herself in the crossfire when a shell exploded close to her on the frontline in Aleppo, killing three rebels. Shelton could easily have been among those hit. Her report on the attack, which included her video of the entire incident, attracted global attention.¹⁴ She had spent several days before the attack interviewing the three victims and their associates.¹⁵ On September 24, she produced another powerful piece about one hospital’s experience of the war.¹⁶

Indisputably, the war was getting worse. Tens of thousands had already died—civilians, rebels and Syrian military. Millions more were displaced to refugee camps both domestic and across the borders in Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon. It grew harder for reporters to travel even in rebelheld zones and the dangers were mounting: 33 journalists died in Syria in 2012 alone. The rebels themselves were splintering into smaller, often more militant, groups.

Kidnapping. The peril to journalists hit Shelton with unexpected force when, on November 22, 2012, her colleague James Foley was kidnapped in Syria. For the next three months, she made it

¹³ 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>

¹⁴ Tracey Shelton, “Life and Death in Aleppo,” *GlobalPost*, September 7, 2012. See: <http://www.globalpost.com/photo-galleries/planet-pic/5718451/life-and-death-aleppo-photos>

¹⁵ Four days later, in an unrelated development that nonetheless reverberated with Shelton, an attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, Libya, killed the US ambassador and others.

¹⁶ Tracey Shelton, “Inside Syria: One hospital’s story,” *GlobalPost*, September 24, 2012. See: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/syria/120921/aleppo-syria-hospital-doctorsmedical-supplies-assad-air-strikes>

her primary business to find him. Occasionally, she thought she had succeeded. “There were times when we were preparing—oh yeah, Jim’s going to come and stay at my place tonight when we pick him up from the exchange, all that kind of stuff,” she recalls. But the promising leads petered out and then stopped. Meanwhile, the war ground on—and the fear grew that either side would soon use chemical weapons.

On watch for chemical weapons attacks

In December 2012, there were fragmentary reports from Syrian activists and citizens of small and medium-sized gas attacks. On December 23, government forces again attacked the rebel stronghold of Homs. Over several weeks, reports seeped out about the possible use of chemical weapons. Some seven were said to have died from “poisonous gas”; others suffered nausea, limp muscles, blurred vision or difficulty breathing. The attack highlighted a growing dilemma: without reporters on the ground, the Western media often had to rely either on video and testimony from Syrian sources, or report nothing at all.

Citizen reports. Many Western news organizations, even those with reporters on the scene, found themselves debating whether to use material provided from inside Syria by local journalists, citizens, rebels and the government. Such material posed obvious difficulties. Often it was hard to understand just what the video depicted. The dating was uncertain. Sometimes it was fake. Absurdly, sometimes both sides used the same footage to prove the atrocities of the other.

But citizen video could provide an invaluable inside picture of events that Western reporters could not cover. The *New York Times*, for example, in July 2012 launched “Watching Syria’s War,” a curated blog dedicated to publishing citizen video. Text explained to readers what the paper was able to verify about the video and what was unknown.¹⁷

By November 2012, the phenomenon of unreliable material had become so prevalent that Shelton wrote a piece about fake videos circulating in Syria.¹⁸ For example, one video that purported to be a beheading by chainsaw in Syria actually came from Mexico and was shot five years earlier. Another showing a fearsome new rebel unit had been staged: the weapons they held were Chinese-made toy guns. News outlets, especially television networks desperate for images, were too often taken in. In May 2012, US networks had run video of “Syrian” soldiers beating protesters that proved to be four-year-old footage from Lebanon. After a May massacre, the BBC ran a photo provided by a Syrian activist that turned out to be a 2003 image from Iraq.

The rising tide of chemical attack reports only made it harder to decide how to treat material from inside Syria that did not come from a known individual. *GlobalPost* editors were grateful that Shelton was able to help determine what was credible. In general, says Middle East Editor Gelling,

¹⁷ To see the NYT blog, go to <http://projects.nytimes.com/watching-syrias-war>.

¹⁸ Tracey Shelton, “The most disturbing fake videos making the rounds in Syria,” *GlobalPost*, November 12, 2012. See: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/syria/121109/fake-syria-videos-images>

"we haven't gotten into the business of publishing all these videos coming out of Syria, partly because we know so many of them are fake."

Citizens do not submit videos to us. If there's citizen video that we are considering using, it's something we've found on social media. [But] we use them rarely, unless we can confirm it either through Tracey's [Shelton] own knowledge or from some other source.

Meanwhile, the war intensified. On February 25, 2013 the government launched a major assault on Aleppo, the city where Shelton usually stayed. Over 140 people died. March 16 marked the second anniversary of the Syrian uprising. On March 19, there was an alleged chemical weapons attack at Khan al-Assal, west of Aleppo. President al-Assad and the rebels each blamed the other for the attack. But details were murky. As the *New York Times* blog put it: "We do not know for sure that either side used the weapons, and if they did, we do not know what they were."¹⁹ Another alleged chemical weapons attack took place the same day in al-Atebeh, a suburb of the capital, Damascus, killing 25 and injuring dozens. In addition, non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the Syrian Observatory for Human Right reported liberal use of ballistic missiles and cluster bombs.

President al-Assad himself requested that the United Nations investigate the charges of a chemical weapons attack and, on March 21, 2013, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon announced that the UN, together with the World Health Organization and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, would look into it. President Obama, echoing his words of the previous August, told a press conference that "the use of chemical weapons is a game changer." By mid-April, media reported that the governments of Israel, the US, France and Britain all claimed to have evidence of chemical weapons use in Syria. But they offered little hard evidence. As an April 24 *New York Times* editorial on the various reports observed, "[W]hile [al-Assad] may be capable of using weapons of mass destruction, there is no proof that he has done so."²⁰

Shelton wanted to get back into Syria to see what she could verify for herself. But in April, she flew to New York City to attend the April 11 award ceremony for the 2012 George Polk awards. She had won for video reporting. The citation mentioned her "compelling journalism that put a human face on the conflict in Syria."²¹ Under the rubric "Inside Syria," *GlobalPost* had submitted a package of five 2012 videos Shelton shot in Aleppo, including her pieces on the hospital and the shell

¹⁹ See: <http://projects.nytimes.com/watching-syrias-war>. Scroll down to 3/19/13. The full text: "What We Don't Know. There is little clear information about the possible use of chemical weapons on Tuesday. Both the government and the rebels accused each other of using them, but neither side produced proof. We do not know for sure that either side used the weapons, and if they did, we do not know what they were."

²⁰ Editorial, "Were chemical weapons used in Syria?," *New York Times*, April 24, 2013. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/25/opinion/were-chemical-weapons-used-in-syria.html>

²¹ For a full list of the 2012 Polk award winners, see http://www.liu.edu/About/News/Univ-CtrPR/2013/February/UC_PR-Feb18-2

attack she narrowly survived. Middle East Editor Gelling attended the awards with her. The next day, she boarded a flight back to Turkey, enroute to Syria.

Sheikh Maqsoud research

On Monday, April 15, Shelton arrived at her friends' house in the Ashrafiyah section of Aleppo. At the time, Ashrafiyah was under the control of a Kurdish militia known as the Popular Protection Unit, or YPG, run by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a militant Kurdish organization founded in 1984. Her friends had news: just the day before, a chemical weapons attack had killed people in the neighboring suburb of Sheikh Maqsoud. "I used to always hear what's going on," comments Shelton. "Everybody talks about everything that's happened lately. It's quite easy when you're living there or spending a lot of time there to just come across these things."

The news was startling. "In Syria at that time, because chemical attacks were this red line, anything that remotely looked as if it could involve any kind of chemical would be labeled instantly as a chemical attack," recalls Shelton. Still, if she could determine that this was the kind of chemical attack President Obama meant when he drew his red line, that would be a worldchanging story. "This wasn't the first one I'd checked out," she says. But "this was the biggest [rumor] I'd come across to date."

So on Tuesday, April 16, she walked to Sheikh Maqsoud; it took about 20 minutes. "I went in there thinking this is huge," she remembers. "I definitely thought" it was a chemical weapons attack. She went to the Kurdish-controlled police station, where officials confirmed that there had been an attack early Sunday morning and that at least three people had died. She asked whether anyone had taken pictures and they named local journalist Rojhit Azad, who agreed to meet Shelton at the station.

Azad brought Shelton both videos and still photos. The graphic video showed the corpses of two dead children and a woman, and other victims lying on metal tables and foaming at the mouth. The photos showed the courtyard staircase of a private family home, and included shots of an explosive device witnesses said was dropped from a helicopter. As usual, Shelton was cautious about accepting the visual material. "You always have to be really careful, especially if you're not on the ground," she says.

You can't verify these sorts of things. Because people, all the time, they will show you footage on their phone and go, this is what I took. I saw this. And then you see if on YouTube, posted by 20 other people.

"Journalist" was also a relative term in Syria. Once the conflict started, many individuals had started to call themselves journalists; rebel groups frequently created their own loosely edited "news" websites. In this case, however, the police confirmed that the photographer was one of the first on the scene. Once she got there, Shelton also was able to see that the photos matched the site. Finally, she noted that the journalist had been working for a couple of years already, and was in his 30s, unlike some of the younger and less reliable activists she had encountered. Too often, she says, "they just repeat stories, especially when you're a journalist."

Especially with chemical weapons. Because that was a red line, everybody wanted to prove that this is chemical weapons, because then maybe the US would come in and help them. Especially rebel forces.

At first, the police would not allow Shelton to visit the site, but they relented the next day after obtaining permission from YPG. There was not much to see. The victims, she learned, had been transferred to Avreen hospital in Afrin, a Kurdish-controlled town some 40 miles distant. The afflicted included members of the first response team, many of whom had to go to the hospital after developing symptoms of dizziness, headache, blurred vision or stomach pain. "There was a white powder covering the stairs, but there was no smell or smoke," Shelton heard from Toul Haldun Zagroz, a Kurdish police officer with the second team on the scene who had also developed symptoms. He added:

When we went inside, we saw the children dead, and the Kurdish police who had arrived before us were on the ground foaming something white from their mouth. Their eyes were so red.

Later that day, Shelton went to an Internet café to call her editor, Gelling. "I pitched it as, this is a chemical attack. This is the big one. Let's follow this," says Shelton. "It was like, Pete, this is huge. I'm going to go check this out... The question was: was it one of those banned chemical weapons?" All the victims had suffered symptoms consistent with a chemical attack; few had visible physical injuries. Gelling instantly understood the importance, and agreed Shelton should pursue it. "The value from our perspective was very, very high, because if we can confirm or deny the existence of chemical weapons, that has major implications for the world," says Gelling.

The truth is, whether we sent her there or not, she was probably going to go, because that's who Tracey is... [Certainly] there was no means for us to get that story outside of Tracey. We weren't going to work with freelancers we didn't know. We were already tentative about things because of the Jim Foley situation. The only viable person to do that [story] would be Tracey, because we knew and trusted her.

On Thursday, April 18, Shelton set out for Afrin, a two-hour bus ride. Her friends went along because the wife was from Afrin. Shelton ended up spending five days in the city. First, she located Avreen Hospital Director Dr. Kawa Hassan. The hospital, he told her, had accepted 22 patients injured in Sheikh Maqsoud. They were unconscious or semi-conscious, foaming at the mouth and nose. He had equipped hospital staff with masks and protective clothing in case the chemical could be transmitted. The patients' clothing and blankets were burned preventively. One—beyond those killed at the scene—died, but the others recovered within five days.

The most notable survivor was Yasser Younes, who remembered nothing but an explosion at 3 a.m. It was his wife and two children who had died. But Shelton could not interview him; Younes had returned to his home village. "He'd left to another village... and I was trying to get there, but I couldn't get anyone to take me out there. I didn't know the exact location" she recalls. Shelton had learned to be careful about accepting rides. In general, she felt safer with groups than individuals.

"You had to be a little more selective about which groups you could trust to take you difference places, for transport through dangerous areas," she says.

They've been known to capture Westerners... You had to be really careful that you had a secure ride, and you really trusted the people that you were with, and that they'd defend you... You just kind of collect people as you go along that you know you can trust with certain things.

Instead, she talked to people in Afrin who had talked to Younes, mostly hospital staff. Hospital Director Dr. Hassan was especially helpful "because he had some knowledge of the effects of these gases. He was very well prepared for it as well," Shelton recalls. Dr. Hassan was persuaded that his patients' symptoms were consistent with a sarin gas attack, a category of chemical weapon that would definitely trigger a US response. But he acknowledged that the attack had not had the devastating effects that full-on sarin would have had. He speculated that it was a weaker strain, had been watered down, or came from old stockpiles.

As for motive, Dr. Hassan theorized that the government wanted to scare the Kurds in Sheikh Maqsoud to prevent them working with the Free Syria Army, which the PKK had recently allowed into its area. Others thought perhaps the FSA had staged the attack to bring in foreign powers. Dr. Hassan had sent the canister recovered from Sheikh Maqsoud for testing to a laboratory in a Kurdish region, and was waiting for the results. Shelton waited as well, but the test results never came through. So on Wednesday, April 24, she returned to Aleppo to write her story.

Story in inbox

On Sunday, April 28, GP Middle East Editor Gelling saw he had an email from Shelton. When she was on assignment in Syria, Gelling "used to sleep with my phone under my pillow," he remembers, so as not to miss any message from her. The email contained her story about Sheikh Maqsoud.

He read it through. Shelton had written what she knew. The facts of the attack. The deaths. The witness accounts. She included her doubts about whether this was a sarin attack. Despite Dr. Hassan's confidence, she had concluded that "the more I looked into it, the more it seemed to be something less. It was something serious, but not like sudden death."

From Gelling's standpoint, the first question was whether to publish on Sunday. He decided it should wait. On Monday at the office, he wrote up an account based on the information from Shelton. By noon, he had a serviceable story, and took it to GP Editor Tom Mucha and Senior Editor David Case. "I had it pretty much ready to go, based on her framework," recalls Gelling.

We definitely felt an urgency to publish it, more than we normally do. A) for competitive reasons, and b) it was a big story and there was a lot of momentum at that moment, with Obama and everything. We felt it was important to get on it as soon as possible, this very unique reporting.

“Peter [Gelling] brought it to me and said, hey, we’ve got this, this is a hot story,” remembers Mucha. All three were aware of its potential. As Mucha puts it: “Do we have evidence that is going to catapult the United States into military action?” But the editors had questions: who had perpetrated the attack? What kind of gas was it? Did this cross Obama’s red line? “Everyone was talking about the red line at that time,” remembers Mucha. It was possible that Shelton had uncovered an incontrovertible violation. “It was a classic case of having information that nobody else had,” says Mucha. “We had eyewitness accounts of some sort of chemical weapons attack on civilians in Sheikh Maqsoud.”

At the same time, *GlobalPost* couldn’t afford to make a mistake. It was a young news organization building its reputation. Moreover, the public and other news outlets remembered all too vividly how the media had failed in 2003 to investigate US government allegations—subsequently disproven—that Saddam Hussein had and was prepared to use weapons of mass destruction. That failure, many later concluded, contributed to the government’s ability to lead the country into an unjustified war. So Mucha called a time out. “The first decision we made was, let’s slow down the process,” he notes.

Let’s ensure we have the proper amount of time to vet the information and make sure we learn everything we can... It’s doubly important for a new news organization that has based itself on editorial excellence to make sure that we’ve got things right.

Mucha and Case decided the next step was to contact chemical weapons experts. On Monday afternoon and Tuesday morning, Gelling and Case called their contacts and researched widely. For example, they consulted the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) website, with its detailed information on the symptoms of exposure to chemical weapons. “We were trying to match or refute the typical symptoms of a sarin gas attack,” says Mucha.

They also called Physicians for Human Rights, a respected authority which had helped determine in 1988 that Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against Iraqi Kurds. Physicians for Human Rights confirmed that even small amounts of sarin caused constricted pupils, tremors and often death. None of those in Sheikh Maqsoud had constricted pupils. All the sources, recalls Mucha, “were very interested in making sure that what was reported was accurate, because everybody understood the stakes were high.” Tellingly, none of those GP contacted was prepared to say, on or off the record, that the attack had involved sarin gas. Moreover, the editors learned that sarin usually arrived in artillery shells or from spray tanks, not in a grenade-like device such as that found in Sheikh Maqsoud.

Telling the story. But if it wasn’t sarin, what was it? Why had the woman and her children died? Why had Younes passed out? It was one thing to realize that the chemical used was not among the worst in Syria’s arsenal. But it was a chemical of some kind, so it had been a chemical attack. The *GlobalPost* editors were resolved not to repeat the media’s failure in 2003 to investigate thoroughly. Should they run the story at all?

At the same time, Shelton had a vivid and well-sourced account of what it was like to live in constant fear of a chemical attack and then to experience one. She had powerful video, interviews and photographs. Shelton was insistent that the local voices she had uncovered be heard. Assuming they ran the story, which elements should GP emphasize, and which play down? Just for starters, what should the headline be?

Appendix 1

GlobalPost staff as of April 2013

Editorial

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[Solana Pyne](#), Senior Video News Producer (New York)
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