



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

On Tuesday, April 30, 2013, at 3:49 p.m., the *GlobalPost* published a story with a joint byline: Tracey Shelton and Peter Gelling. It had an improbable title: “Syria: The horrific chemical weapons attack that probably wasn’t a chemical weapons attack.”¹ Middle East Editor Gelling wrote the headline. “It just sort of popped into my head,” he says.

For me, it reflected the exact process that I went through. A chemical weapons attack, because it was a chemical. People had a reaction to it. It was a chemical weapons attack, but it wasn’t a chemical weapons attack. It was a perfect encapsulation of what anybody’s reaction to the story might be.²

Both Gelling and Editor Mucha felt that, even if the attack had not been with sarin gas, the story was significant. “The fact that we were the only Western media on the ground at that scene at this place... even if it’s not chemical weapons, we felt that’s a very important story,” says Gelling. “We had something nobody else had,” echoes Mucha.

We had a really complete story that transported the reader and the viewer to the place... It had all of the right contextual information, the medical information, the military information. And it was in a presented in a way that told the most complete story that we could.³

The article included the video—clearly labeled graphic—given to Shelton, and photos of the canister that had contained the explosive. It opened with the story of Younes and his family,

¹ Tracey Shelton and Peter Gelling, “Syria: The horrific chemical weapons attack that probably wasn’t a chemical weapons attack,” *GlobalPost*, April 30, 2013. See: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/syria/130430/syria-chemical-weapons-attack-aleppo-sheikh-maqsoud-april-13-assad-obama-fsa>

² Author’s interview with Peter Gelling on September 22, 2014, in Boston. All further quotes from Gelling, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

³ Author’s telephone interview with Thomas Mucha on October 15, 2014. All further quotes from Mucha, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

This epilogue was written by Kirsten Lundberg, Director, for the Case Consortium @ Columbia. The faculty sponsor was Prof. Ann Cooper of the Graduate School of Journalism. (1214)

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plus quotes from the hospital staff in Afrin about what they were sure was a chemical weapons attack. But the article quickly raised questions. “A closer analysis,” wrote Gelling and Shelton, “raises doubts and highlights the challenge of confirming whether the Syrian government—or anyone else—is using chemical weapons.” They cited “experts” persuaded that victims’ symptoms were inconsistent with a sarin attack.

Throughout the summer that followed, however, there was a steady drumbeat of reported chemical weapons attacks. The BBC, Le Monde and other publications carried reports, often brought out of Syria by correspondents who risked much to get in and out. Then on August 21, 2013, hundreds died during a chemical attack outside Damascus. There were videos of mass burials. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad denied responsibility for the attack. The UN commissioned an investigation. But UN teams onsite were unable to check out the charges; they came under sniper attack themselves.

On August 30, the White House confirmed there had been a chemical attack on August 21. But the US was unsure how to respond. President Barack Obama contemplated a list of options, none of them appealing. On September 8, it came as a relief to many when Syria accepted a proposal from Russia to remove or destroy all its chemical weapons.

Meanwhile, *GlobalPost* officially pulled out of Syria in June 2013. Shelton filed two stories with Syria datelines after her April 30 dispatch. Both were from Aleppo, one on May 30 and another on June 12. After that, her Syria coverage was datelined Turkey or Lebanon; *GlobalPost* sent no one else into Syria. Shelton also spent time in Libya, reporting on the state of affairs post-Gaddafi.

Death. On August 19, 2014, Shelton’s *GlobalPost* colleague James Foley was beheaded by a group that had emerged in Syria in the preceding months, the Islamic State or ISIS. The execution hit Shelton hard. “The end of it was really tough,” she says.⁴ For her part, Shelton decided to end her senior correspondent relationship with *GlobalPost*. She wanted the freedom to go wherever she liked, including conflict zones, without seeking editors’ permission. In October 2014, she returned to Australia for a visit, her first trip home in years.

⁴ Author’s interview with Tracey Shelton via Skype on October 2, 2014. All further quotes from Shelton, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

