
Understanding Douma

The New Media Propaganda Wars and
the Value of a Second Draft

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UNDERSTANDING DOUMA: THE NEW MEDIA PROPAGANDA WARS AND THE VALUE OF A SECOND DRAFT.

ABSTRACT: A new paper by James Harkin, Joan Shorenstein Fellow (Fall, 2018) and Director of the Centre for Investigative Journalism in London explores current debates about online disinformation through the prism of Syria reporting and a single incident – a heavily contested chemical attack which took place in the Damascus suburb of Douma on 7 April 2018.

Drawing on his own experience as a Syria reporter, his contacts on all sides of the conflict and a trip he took to Douma in July 2018, Harkin’s essay suggests that, in retrospect, Syria was a live-fire rehearsal for many of our current concerns. It also has illuminating lessons for how journalists should navigate a path through their new digital landscape. While evidence from new media is a fantastic new tool in the armoury of journalists and intelligence-gatherers, he argues, it’s already been weaponized on all sides – as a result of which truth-seeking journalism is increasingly inseparable from the task of breaking through the noise and fury of electronic information in a climate thick with propaganda, conspiracy theories and half-truths. But the challenge of how to report incidents like Douma, Harkin argues, contains the seeds of an exciting new direction for journalism. Rather than trying to fix the first draft tapped out on new media, he argues, it can find its feet and its value in a slower, more inter-disciplinary approach, alive not only to new media sleuthing but to university-based expertise, which he calls a Second Draft.

Note: Portions of this paper were previously published in *The Intercept* and the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

This much we know: To have been in the Syrian town of Douma, the final rebel military holdout in the suburbs of Damascus, on Saturday, April 7, 2018 must have sounded and felt very much like hell on earth. Since 2013, when a shifting cast of rebel militias wrested control of the area, the whole region of Eastern Ghouta had been under effective siege by the Syrian government. Food and medicines were expensive or impossible to come by. Already miserably poor, it was all the locals could do to stay alive. Last February, the Syrian army, backed by Russian airplanes and emboldened by joint military successes elsewhere, began a final, determined assault. The operation was branded “Damascus Steel,”¹ and it met with surprising success. By March the Syrian army and its allied militias had carved Eastern Ghouta into three distinct enclaves, each under the control of a different militia. The first two quickly agreed to deals, under whose terms the fighters and their families could choose to be bussed out to northern Syria or take their chances by surrendering to the Syrian army. Jaish al-Islam, or the Army of Islam, which maintained a tight grip on Douma, held out. As March gave way to April the Syrian army was about a kilometer away, and closing in.²

This was the endgame. For nearly two months, in between shaky truces, Syrian helicopters and airplanes had intermittently pounded Douma. After yet another ceasefire and round of negotiations failed, they returned on Friday, April 6 with a vengeance.³ The government was losing patience. The government was losing patience. So were many Damascenes, who’d grown sick of the volleys of mortars being sent back into central Damascus by the rebels. Tens of thousands of civilians in Douma were caught between them, enduring skyrocketing prices, malnutrition and the outbreak of disease. Cameras from regime-friendly TV channels were trained on Douma to watch the ongoing campaign, primed for imminent victory.⁴ By Saturday, according to one account, the onslaught from shelling, airstrikes, and barrel bombs lasted a full six hours.⁵ There would have been blinding clouds of dust, breaking glass, and exploding concrete from the constant shelling, the smoke and

¹ Hamidreza Azizi, “5 Reasons Iran is staying out of Eastern Ghouta”, *Al-Monitor*, April 2 2018. Accessed 13 November 2018. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/iran-eastern-ghouta-afri-policy-russia-assad-evacuation.html>

² That the Syrian armed forces were around a kilometre away or less comes from a face-to-face interview with Nabeel Shah, former rebel prisoner in Douma’s al-Tawba prison, in Damascus; and a face-to-face interview with Hassan, a soldier who was with the Syrian army in the assault, in July 2018 in Damascus.

³ Tom Perry and Leila Bassam, “Syrian government launches assault on last rebel enclave in Ghouta”, *Reuters*, 6 April 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-douma/syrian-government-launches-assault-on-rebel-held-douma-idUSKCN1HD1VO>. Accessed 13 November 2018.

⁴ Face-to-face interview with a Kafr Souseh resident, central Damascus, 9 July, confirmed in a Facebook message, 18 September.

⁵ Name and details withheld at the request of source.

stench of ordnance, the juddering of helicopters waiting low overhead to drop their improvised barrel bombs. It was worse than anything that had happened before. Those who could took cover underground.

The following day, Jaish al-Islam would agree to leave, in return for handing over all the hostages – both civilians and soldiers - it held in Douma. But before it did, it accused the Syrian army of carrying out a chemical attack on the area that killed scores of people.⁶ Around the same time, video began trickling out showing children being treated at a makeshift underground hospital in the city for breathing problems — the kind that one might associate with a chemical attack. One of the first reports was from the opposition Violations Documentation Center, which noted that a munition had been dropped on the Saada bakery at 4 p.m. local time on Saturday, killing 25 people. Those in the vicinity thought they smelled chlorine. “We later discovered the bodies of people who had suffocated from toxic gases,” one member of a local civil defense team told the VDC. “They were in closed spaces, sheltering from the barrel bombs, which may have caused their quick death as no one heard their screams. Some of them were apparently trying to reach an open space because we found their bodies on the stairs.”

The VDC reported a second attack around 7:30 p.m. in the vicinity of al-Shuhada Square, or Martyrs Square. This one was more serious because of the weapon allegedly used. One doctor told the VDC that “there were symptoms indicative of organic phosphorus compounds in the sarin gas category,” but added that “the smell of chlorine was also present in the place.” A doctor from the Syrian American Medical Society, known as SAMS, told the VDC that colleagues had seen symptoms that included heavy foaming from the mouth and nose and burning of the corneas — injuries that, according to a local doctor reached by the VDC, “do not resemble chlorine attack symptoms.” SAMS said that more than 500 cases, mostly women and children, from the “target site” had been brought to medical centers “with symptoms indicative of exposure to a chemical agent. Patients have shown signs of respiratory distress, central cyanosis, excessive oral foaming, corneal burns, and the emission of chlorine-like odour.” Six people died at medical centers, SAMS reported,⁷ and at

⁶ “Jaish al-Islam to leave Douma in return for releasing prisoners”, *Reuters*, April 8 2018. Accessed 13 November 2018. <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta-negotiati/jaish-al-islam-to-leave-douma-in-return-for-releasing-prisoners-idUKKBN1HF09Z>

⁷ Syrian American Medical Society website. Accessed 13 November 2018. https://www.sams-usa.net/press_release/sams-syria-civil-defense-condemn-chemical-attack-douma/

least 43 people had been found dead with the same symptoms, most likely from “an organophosphate element” like sarin.⁸

The video and photos of the more grievous evening attack, which targeted an apartment building, had been collected mainly by a group of opposition activists called Douma Revolution, who’d been working for some time in the area. The most striking were images of two yellow gas cylinders and footage from the makeshift hospital of locals, including children, being treated for breathing problems. That photo and video evidence was republished by Bellingcat, a U.K.-based organization specializing in open-source online investigations run by Eliot Higgins, whose eagle-eyed attention to photos of barrel and improvised chemical weapons earlier in Syria’s civil war on the pseudonymous blog Brown Moses had won him a reputation in the field. Bellingcat also reviewed the work of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, which had estimated 55 deaths and 860 injured as a result of the apartment building attack, as well as that of the rescue organization Syria Civil Defence, generally known as the White Helmets, which like SAMS counted 43 dead and 500 injured from the same incident. Paying close attention to the publicly available imagery, Bellingcat concluded that there had been at least 34 fatalities from the apartment attack “as a result of a gas cylinder filled with what is most likely chlorine gas.”⁹

The rest is military history. Six days later, the United States and its allies launched cruise missiles from the air and from nearby warships and submarines at targets associated with what remains of the Syrian government’s chemical weapons program. Those targets included a scientific research center in Damascus and a chemical weapons facility near Homs that had been used for the production of sarin.¹⁰ The massacre on April 7, said President Donald Trump, represented “a significant escalation in a pattern of chemical weapons use by that very terrible regime.”¹¹ In an additional information sheet, the White House noted that “a significant body of information points to the regime using chlorine in its bombardment of Duma, while some additional information points to the regime also

⁸ “Syria says ready to start rebel talks after alleged gas attack.” Reuters, 8 April 2018. Accessed 13 November 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta/syria-says-ready-to-start-rebel-talks-after-alleged-gas-attack-idUSKBN1HF074>

⁹ See Bellingcat.com website, “Open Source Survey of Alleged Chemical Attacks in Douma on 7th April”. Accessed 13 November 2018. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/04/11/open-source-survey-alleged-chemical-attacks-douma-7th-april-2018>

¹⁰ “U.S., Britain and France strike Syria over suspected chemical weapons attack”, New York Times, 13 April 2018. Accessed 13 November 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/trump-strikes-syria-attack.html>

¹¹ The White House website, “Statement by President Trump on Syria.” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-syria/> Accessed 13 November 2018.

using the nerve agent sarin.”¹² Following up with a characteristic tweet after the U.S. airstrikes, President Trump declared, “Mission Accomplished!”¹³

It wasn't clear that anything had been accomplished - certainly not to the satisfaction of Syrians on any side of the conflict. Instead, it's useful to try to understand what really happened in Douma from the ground up. During six months of research into the incident, including a trip to Douma and interviews with dozens of Syrian activists, civilians, journalists, and experts, I encountered a great deal of confusion about how the attack had played out, even among those who witnessed it.

At least one chemical attack did take place in Douma on April 7, and people died as a result. There could have been no other culprit but a Syrian army helicopter. But the way it happened bears little resemblance to what was broadcast to the world. From the start, the evidence presented by rebel media activists was fraught and confusing. That's hardly surprising, because some of those behind it — including some who produced immediate and detailed reports — weren't actually there. Into the gaps of that initial propaganda collage came a wave of scepticism, which then seeped, like a toxic chemical, into confusion and outright conspiracy-theorizing. Into the gaps of that initial propaganda barrage seeped skepticism, which morphed into confusion and outright conspiracy-theorizing. State actors, Russian propagandists, and international observers joined the fray, cherry-picking details to illustrate the story they wanted told.¹⁴ Added to the fog of war, in other words, was a fractious new layer of electronic propaganda which turned every tweet or screengrab into a potential weapon in the hands of one of the belligerents.

Beyond the war in Syria, the cloud of misinformation that enveloped the attack in Douma stands as a cautionary tale. In the era of “fake news,” it is a case study in the choreography of our new propaganda wars. With the mainstream media in wholesale retreat — and, in the case of Syria, credibly threatened with death from many sides — new information actors have stepped into the breach. Reading the runes of their imagery is an exciting reporting tool. But their photos, video, and social media posts also offers a vanishingly narrow, excoriatingly subjective view of how conflicts

¹² The White House website, “United States Government Assessment of the Assad regime’s Chemical Weapons Use”. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/united-states-government-assessment-assad-regimes-chemical-weapons-use>. Accessed 13 November 2018.

¹³ “Trump declares ‘mission accomplished’ in Syria strike”, *CNN*, 14 April 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/14/politics/trump-syria-strike/index.html> Accessed 13 November 2018.

¹⁴ Robert Mackey, “Russia sows doubts over chemical attack in Syria, aided by pro-Trump cable channel”, *The Intercept*, 20 April 2018. <https://theintercept.com/2018/04/20/russia-sows-doubts-chemical-attack-syria-aided-pro-trump-cable-channel>. Accessed 10 February 2019.

unfold. As a result, such artefacts have become light weapons in an information war that easily becomes an end in itself.

2

Before 2011, Douma wasn't on many people's travel itineraries. A satellite town at Damascus's northeastern edge and the gateway to its lush agricultural belt in the suburban sprawl of Eastern Ghouta, the place had been built out to absorb the thousands of Syrians who'd arrived from the countryside in search of work. Douma was a bustle of mercantile activity and a great place to find a bargain; people from Damascus would flock there for its bountiful street markets. But it was also overcrowded. Just like the other suburban slums around Syria's major cities, it was scarred by rampant unemployment, bureaucratic corruption and the daily humiliations of young, often unemployed men at the hands of the Syrian authorities. Douma had none of Damascus's cosmopolitan mix. Long socially conservative and majority Sunni, in the last decade, a new Islamic piety and a vibrant culture of Salafism both bloomed amid this new community of urban poor.¹⁵

When the uprising began in Syria's towns and cities in 2011, Douma was one of the first places to catch fire. If Hama was the cradle of the early revolt and Homs was its crucible, Douma was the broader Damascus region's proudest contribution to the early rebellion and a steady thorn in the side of the authorities. Once remarkable for its markets, it now grew famous for its large, carnival-like street protests against President Bashar al-Assad and his ruling clique. On a visit to Damascus one afternoon in February 2012, I persuaded a Syrian friend to drive me into Douma. The route involved talking our way through several military checkpoints; apart from the graffiti on the walls there were few signs of life. Even then, by the evenings, Douma was under the effective control of rebel groups and the site of nightly demonstrations. Fearing what was to come, many residents, either those who supported the government or who feared the growing militarization and extremism in the uprising, left.

¹⁵ Aron Lund, "The Syrian rebel who tried to build an Islamist paradise", *Politico*, 31 March 2017. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/the-syrian-rebel-who-built-an-islamic-paradise-214969>. Accessed 10 February 2019.

Those who stayed behind soon found themselves subject to a new kind of security regime. By 2013, early attempts at armed resistance and rebellion under the loose umbrella of the Free Syrian Army had given way to better-armed, more highly motivated groups — especially Jaish al-Islam, a Saudi-backed Salafist group that came to rule Douma. On the night of December 9, 2013, four of the country’s most prominent revolutionaries - Razan Zaitouneh, Samira al-Khalil, Wa’el Hamada, and Nazem Hamadi - were kidnapped from their offices in Douma. The so-called Douma Four were abducted by armed militias under the nose, and with what must have been the complicity, of Jaish al-Islam. Nothing has been heard from the four since; they’re very likely all dead. A prime mover behind the oppositionist Local Coordination Committees and a hero to many revolutionists, Zaitouneh had established the VDC in 2011 to investigate human rights abuses. The organization had attracted funding from the United States and Europe — especially after Zaitouneh and her team were instrumental in reporting chemical attacks in nearby Ghouta in August 2013, which killed hundreds of people and which most observers attribute to sarin gas and the Syrian government. But Zaitouneh’s reporting and her liberal values, taken with the fact that much of her funding came from the U.S., made some in Douma suspicious of her motives.¹⁶ Shortly before she went missing, she’d received a death threat that many have attributed to Jaish al-Islam.¹⁷

Since then there’s been little information independent of Jaish al-Islam coming out of Douma. At the time of the April 7 attacks, the VDC had no presence there, which was not surprising, given what had happened to its leaders. Like almost everyone else, the VDC was getting its information from contacts on the ground via social media. Those organizations still able to still work in Douma did so under license from Jaish al-Islam, or they operated in secret. In the best of circumstances, the reporting of pro-opposition outfits like the Local Coordinating Committees has often been nakedly partisan. But with independent media unable to operate in

¹⁶ The same day Razan Zaitouneh went missing, on 9 December 2013, I’d sent her an email. In the following weeks I tapped up some of my rebel sources to find out what why she might have been taken. One popular theory was that Zaitouneh, who’d expanded her mandate to investigate abuses by rebel groups as well as the regime, had gone too far and annoyed a local rebel commander. The corrosive air of suspicion, however, ran much further than that, and was bound up with funding. A former spokesperson for the rebel “Revolutionary Council” in Damascus who I reached by phone via new media alleged that funds sent to Zaitouneh’s organisation in the wake of the chemical attacks might not have been properly distributed, adding that some had become uncomfortable with her presence in the area. “They felt she was monitoring and observing everything there, and that she might not be trustworthy on the security level. There were rumours that she was not true to the revolution, that the people backing her had their own agenda and that she was one of the tools. We are sure, they told me, that she is reporting to the people who are funding her, that she has a different agenda.” Phone interview via new media, January 2014.

¹⁷ For detail on the kidnapping of the “Douma Four”, her husband Yassin al-Haj Saleh’s book. Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *Impossible Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017)

territory controlled by the Syrian government and hardly any outside journalists able to get into the country because of kidnapping threats from militants and incessant bombing by the government, they're the only way to find out what's going on.

In the immediate aftermath of the Douma attacks, Syria's official media largely ignored the allegations about chemical weapons; they were busy celebrating their win. This time, it fell to the Russians to mount a media offensive. In the immediate aftermath of the Douma attacks, Syria's official media largely ignored the allegations about chemical weapons; they were busy celebrating their win. This time, it fell to the Russians to mount a media offensive. The day before the Douma attack, the Russian military, as it often does, had predicted that Syrian rebel groups were "plotting explosions of makeshift chemical charges containing chlorine in a number of areas under their control."¹⁸ Wildblue. The Russians had brokered the evacuation deal in Douma, after all, and their military police who were helping to enforce it.¹⁹ It was also their job to make the attack sites safe for the arrival of inspectors from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Two days after the attacks, in footage shot by a local activist, Russian military policemen can be seen arriving onsite.²⁰

The OPCW inspectors took a week to get to Damascus, and then another week negotiating safe access to the sites in Douma; after that they spent ten days visiting the hospital and the alleged attack locations, collecting samples and interviewing witnesses.²¹ But before they'd finished, apparently concerned at the pace of events in the two weeks since the U.S. airstrikes, the Russian delegation to the OPCW threw a brazen unofficial press conference at the organization's headquarters in The Hague. In front of the assembled cameras, they produced witnesses from Douma, including an 11-year-old boy named Hassan Diab, one of those filmed at the hospital in the aftermath of the attack. Hassan and his father told the same story: Upon hearing screaming about a chemical attack they'd run to the makeshift hospital where they'd

¹⁸ "Russian top brass warn Al-Nusra, Free Syrian Army plotting chemical attacks in Syria", *Tass*, 6 April 2018. <http://tass.com/defense/998199>. Accessed 10 February 2019.

¹⁹ "Rebel fighters begin leaving Syria's Douma after weeks-long military assault", *Reuters*, 8 April 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta-negotiati/rebel-fighters-begin-leaving-syrias-douma-after-weeks-long-military-assault-idUSKBN1HF09Z> Accessed 13 November 2018.

²⁰ Kareem Shaheen, "Douma inhabitants prepare to leave after deadly chemical attack", *The Guardian*, 9 April 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/09/douma-inhabitants-prepare-leave-deadly-syria-chemical-attack>. The visit appeared to have been recorded by local activists, where it appeared on Al-Jazeera: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QCPj5nUwkg>

²¹ OPCW website. "Interim report of the OPCW fact-finding mission in Syria regarding the incident of alleged use of toxic chemicals as a weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018". Accessed 13 November 2018. https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/S_series/2018/en/s-1645-2018_e_.pdf. Accessed 13 November 2018.

been doused with water. In retrospect, said Hassan's father, he didn't believe that there had been any chemical attack. The Russians also granted the floor to a doctor and another hospital worker who'd been on duty that day, both of whom claimed that the patients they'd seen had suffered injuries consistent with smoke and dust inhalation as a result of regular bombing²² Separately, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and the Russian ambassador to London briefed the international media that British intelligence services, working with the White Helmets, had been involved in "this staged event."²³

Formed in 2013, the White Helmets only maintain a presence in rebel-controlled areas, as Douma was on the night of the attack. Like any other aid or reporting outfit in those areas, it operates with the permission of the controlling militias, who are either grateful for the medics' support or tolerate their presence. Much of the White Helmets' first-responder work is unobjectionable and utterly necessary — rescuing civilians from buildings that have just been bombed by Russian or Syrian airplanes, for example. All the same, and perhaps because the group carries cameras to document their work and has been the subject of various glorifying documentaries, it is now at the center of a brutish new media war between international supporters of the Syrian revolt, who uphold the White Helmets as unimpeachable heroes, and international defenders of the Syrian government, who have said that they're first-aiders for Al Qaeda. The Russian government, of course, has every incentive to delegitimize and exaggerate the power of Syrian first-responders, who are sometimes the only sources of information about its bombing campaign. The Syrian government appears to have been directly targeting White Helmets from the air and on the ground for the same reason.

But the Russian allegations about intelligence links and propaganda maneuvers did not come from nowhere. The British-led organization that branded the White Helmets and provided its training and equipment, ARK, was run by a publicity-shy former British diplomat and funded by the U.S. State Department and the British Foreign Office. ARK's work in Syria started in 2012, when it paid Syrian activists to make propaganda films in favor of the revolt against Assad through a production

²² "Russia says its witnesses discredit alleged chemical attack in Syria", BBC News, 26 April 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43912739>. Accessed 13 November 2018. The full Russian press conference can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKil4rhDFW8>

²³ "U.S. says it has proof Assad carried out Douma gas attack", *The Guardian*, 13 April 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/13/uk-denounces-claims-it-was-behind-staged-syrian-gas-attack>. Accessed 13 November 2018. "Russia says Britain helped fake Syria chemical attack", *Reuters*, 13 April 2018 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta-provocati/russia-says-britain-helped-fake-syria-chemical-attack-idUSKBN1HK24P> Accessed 13 November 2018.

company called Basma. Operating out of offices in Istanbul and Gaziantep in Turkey, it was soon bidding for civil defense contracts in Northern Syria for the kind of work that would end up being done by the White Helmets. A few of its employees were veterans of the British Army; others included pollsters and policy advisers, a consultant who had previously worked for a “psychological operations” firm, and a development professional with experience in “in-country information-gathering.”

According to internal reports and emails provided to me by a Syrian opposition activist in 2014, ARK was also gathering intelligence on Islamist groups in the country, and those reports were being privately forwarded by a British Army liaison officer to U.S. Central Command, with an email recommending additional funding for the organization’s filmmaking arm. “It would be reinforcing success for comparatively modest costs,” noted the liaison officer. The White Helmets are now supported by another organization, called Mayday Rescue, established by a senior ARK staffer, and no concrete evidence has emerged that ARK or its affiliates are using the White Helmets for intelligence-gathering. What's certain is that the cameras worn by these civil defence workers see what the controlling militias allow them to see, usually the bombing runs of the Syrian and Russian air force, generating skepticism among some observers about the reliability of their reporting.

When it came to Douma, the Russians weren’t the only ones who were skeptical, at least initially, that chemical weapons had been used. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a U.K.-based outfit that leans toward the opposition but whose reporting network inside the country is usually seen as most authoritative by the international media, noted the day after the attack that people had died in Douma through suffocation, but couldn’t say whether chemical weapons had been used.

At least some of that caution appears to have been warranted. Three months after the attack, the OPCW released its interim report into what happened in Douma. The report found no evidence of organophosphorus nerve agents like sarin either at the site or in samples from the casualties — something of a surprise, because the suspected use of sarin had been one of the justifications for American airstrikes back in April, and alleged Syrian chemical weapons facilities their primary target. But the investigators did find something else. In the aftermath of the attack, video shot by gas mask-clad activists had fastened on the two yellow gas canisters: one lying on a bed, filmed on April 8 by Douma Revolution, and the second perched on a top-floor

balcony and apparently recorded the following evening by the White Helmets.²⁴ Samples collected at both locations turned up “various chlorinated organic chemicals” along with “the residues of explosive” — not quite the same thing as saying that chlorine had been used as a chemical weapon, but evidence that seemed to head in that direction.²⁵

3

On July 9, 2018, three days after the OPCW’s interim report was published, I travelled to Douma. It was a blisteringly hot morning, and I was in a taxi with a female translator-minder from Syria’s Information Ministry and a Japanese journalist who was going there anyway and with whom I’d hitched a ride. This was the first journalist visa I’d been allowed since March 2016. For over 18 months, I’d languished on a blacklist, the belated result of illegal trips into Northern Syria I’d taken with rebel and Kurdish groups earlier in the conflict. “No one wants to work with you,” the amiable new handler for foreign journalists shrugged on my arrival at the Information Ministry building in Mezzeh. It was, he lamented, because of my reputation for giving minders the slip.

The road from Damascus to Douma snaked through the same checkpoints I remembered from six years ago, but now these were the weary signposts of a war zone rather than the punctuation of a stressed-out security state. The Syrian army had entered Douma three months earlier, and the city was returning to nervous life. Some residents had endured the conflict and were finally beginning to rebuild, while others had returned to reclaim their homes and reopen their shops; yet others whizzing by in cars and on motorbikes seemed to have arrived from out of town, possibly carpet-bagger friends of the Syrian armed forces. The broad al-Shuhada Square was still largely empty — a few local women walked by in niqabs and abayas, clutching their children’s hands and watching us intently.

²⁴ For the former, see this page on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/YASERALDOUMANI2/videos/993511674136138> and this Twitter update: <https://twitter.com/1BilalAbuSalah/status/982956657624911873>. For the latter, see this Twitter update: <https://twitter.com/SyriaCivilDef/status/983768284133806080>

²⁵ OPCW website. “Interim report of the OPCW fact-finding mission in Syria regarding the incident of alleged use of toxic chemicals as a weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018”. Accessed 13 November 2018. https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/S_series/2018/en/s-1645-2018_e_.pdf.

Douma was a blackened shadow of its former self, many of its buildings still listing or reduced to charred metal and concrete, but a whole new city had been quietly carved out beneath it. Our first stop, a few yards from al-Shuhada Square, was at the mouth of a 3-meter-wide underground tunnel, reinforced with corrugated steel and concrete. It had been constructed by the Islamist rebels several years back, according to a soldier who walked us through it. He told us that hostages held by Jaish al-Islam had done the building. In total, it stretched for more than 5 kilometers and was broad enough to drive a truck through. The tunnel had been set up to access a makeshift hospital emergency ward, whose spartan facilities were arranged over a single floor underground. Five meters below ground and reinforced by 13 meters of sandbagging above that, the hospital was still functioning when I arrived. Orderlies hovered around stretchers, as did Syrian soldiers. A woman collected medicine for her sick child. It was from here that footage had emerged of alleged gas attack victims having water poured over them from hoses and being given asthma inhalers by panicked medical workers and civilians. The first man I came across, who told me his name was Abu Nazir, explained that he didn't work at the hospital but that on the day of the attack, he had made his way to the huge tunnel outside in search of shelter. "We were unable to breathe," he said, "and stayed in hiding."²⁶

The second man I came across, a laconic 20-year-old local nurse called Anas Sobheha, told me that he had seen everything. At around 7 p.m. that April evening, he said, a child of about 6 years old was brought into the hospital. His face had turned blue. "He had asthma, and there'd been a fire at his home, and the smoke had made it worse. And they thought it was a chemical attack," Sobheha said. There were a lot of wounded people around, but Sobheha had given the boy some medicine and he had gotten better quickly. All the same, his family had elected to stay at the hospital, feeling safer in the fortified location. About 20 minutes later, Sobheha said, one of the White Helmet workers came in holding a baby and screaming about a chemical attack "and everyone starts freaking out, thinking about chemical weapons, but there was only this child, and he'd just inhaled smoke from a fire." The White Helmet was desperate for staff to help, and chaos ensued — a man sitting in the facility with his brother grabbed the hose "and started throwing water on everyone inside." There were around four people filming these events, Sobheha remembered, but the problem wasn't chemicals: "The cases that came here were suffocation from smoke, and most of them were children." The baby went back to his house, he laughed, "and he's in Douma today."

²⁶ Audio interview, 9 July 2018, translated both by translator from the Syrian Ministry of Information and re-translated by my own translator afterwards.

As we talked, several Syrian soldiers joined the conversation, just as interested in his testimony as I was. Sobheha's words were also being translated by a minder from the Syrian Information Ministry, whose staffers report to higher-ups on who foreign journalists talk to and what they say. Clearly, Sobheha wasn't speaking entirely freely. Nonetheless, he wasn't shy of apportioning blame to the Syrian army (and when I contacted him later via WhatsApp from London he assured me that he'd told me the whole truth). Most of the deaths that day had already happened before the supposed chemical attacks, he told me. At about 4 p.m., he remembered, scores of people arrived at the emergency ward injured and bleeding. When I prodded him about the people who had allegedly been killed by chemical weapons that day, he flinched in exasperation. Two hundred and seventy people had been killed on April 6 and 7, according to the data kept by his improvised hospital, women and children as well as fighters, their numbers collected by the rebels, and "most of the injured and bleeding they came here." What had killed them? "Mostly rockets."

There were too many patients and not enough doctors, he remembered, and you just had to do the best you could. In the afternoon, there were no camerapeople around to witness any of it, according to him, because the medical staff were under so much pressure. "These were the worst days," he said. "I can't explain how it felt." He'd already been interviewed by the OPCW inspectors and was growing weary of their talk about chemical weapons. He'd been trained to treat people poisoned by such weapons, and the protocol was that staff would work outside the hospital in that event. "I didn't treat anyone with a chemical attack," he said, "because if I did, I'm going to get affected." When I asked him what he thought about all this talk of chemicals, he was polite but firm. "I don't want to repeat this word again."²⁷

From al-Shuhada Square, and now flanked by an escort vehicle from the Syrian army, we traveled at my suggestion to Tawba, a sprawling network of tunnels between buildings that the rebels had converted into an intricate prison. We entered via the mangled remains of one municipal structure, then inched our way in darkness through a latticework of improvised prison cells into an underground passageway hewn out of earth and rock. At times, the wet earth was so cloying as to make us cough; on several occasions, a few clumps fell to the ground around us, giving even our military guide pause for thought. But, like an archaeologist marveling at the primitive ways of his forebears, he was keen to show us how his enemies had lived. The journey took us deep into the ground, after which we rose back toward the

²⁷ Audio interview with Anas Sobheha, 9 July 2018, translated by my translator from the Syrian Ministry of Information and re-translated by my own translator afterwards.

surface and emerged into completely different building several hundred meters from the first. All this, too, was the work of captives and hostages. Some were Syrian soldiers, but many others had been taken based on their religion; most were Alawi, Shia, and Ismaili Muslims from everywhere in Syria, whom their Islamist kidnappers deemed impure.²⁸

One of them was a 55-year-old called Nabeel Taha, who I met the following evening in a community center in Damascus. Taha wasn't referred to me by the Syrian authorities; I'd begged his number from a local journalist who works for the Associated Press. Taha had been kidnapped in November 2014, he told me, 200 kilometers away in Hama. His job as an army translator made him of immediate interest to the Islamist rebels who hauled him out of a taxi with his lawyer brother. Both were Shia Muslims, which further enraged their captors. During the first few weeks of Taha's captivity, he was beaten and tortured almost all the time — hung from the ceiling, tormented with implements, insulted for his religion. Then he was transferred to a holding cell in Tawba, where he was put to work, almost 24 hours a day, digging tunnels.

When I brought up the alleged chemical weapons attacks, Taha felt sure that they couldn't have been the work of the Syrian army. On April 7, he remembered, Jaish al-Islam informed the hostages that they were going to be released. There's no way that the Islamists he knew would have gone ahead and released anyone, he believes, if the army had started dropping chemical weapons on civilians later that same day, yet the hostages were duly set free in two groups over the next two days. Dropping chemicals didn't seem to make military sense either. On April 7, the Syrian army was around 400 meters from the prison, Taha guessed — he could hear the rattle of Kalashnikovs — and Douma is not a big place; it would have been stupid for the government to land chemicals near its own troops. It was “the pressure of traditional weapons” that forced Jaish al-Islam's hand, not chlorine or sarin, Taha maintained. He can still remember the noise and the bombings that occurred during those final few days; they were the worst he'd ever heard. The focus on chemical weapons was a propaganda win for Jaish al-Islam, he said: “Every time Jaish al-Islam lose, they turn a military loss into a political gain.”

In Douma the Syrian authorities had been happy to show me around Tawba prison, and they were also happy for me to see the hospital. But they were less keen to bring me to the sites of the alleged chemical attacks. As the day wore on and we made our

²⁸ This comes directly from Nabeel Taha's testimony, who'd introduced properly in the next paragraph.

way back to al-Shuhada Square, it became apparent that the sites would not be on our itinerary. My minder-translator didn't know where the attacks were supposed to have taken place, and the major escorting us claimed to have no clue either. Losing patience and without any signal on my mobile phone to check their location, I broke away and walked around the square asking passersby in English and Arabic if they knew anything about the alleged chemical attacks. No one seemed to know what I was talking about — or, if they did, they didn't seem eager to help. Presently, I noticed a young man covered in grease, revving a motorbike at the side of the square and watching the disturbance. I asked him the same question. "You will not find anyone like me," he quipped, rearranging a pair of badly bent spectacles on his face. "I am from Douma and I'm going to help you."

My minder-cum-translator warned me that we should get back into the car and wait for the return of our military escort but the motorcyclist looked anxious at the idea and unwilling to hang around. On a whim, I jumped onto the back of his bike and we rode a few blocks back from al-Shuhada Square, stopping outside an apartment building on an abandoned, heavily blitzed street. Was this the place, I asked him? "Yes." How many people were killed? "Fifty." He couldn't remember the exact day and didn't know any of the dead, but he was sure it had been chemicals because of the odor. "A very strong smell," he told me, holding his nose for effect. "Salaam-Alaikum," he said, wanting to be gone. Was it just this block of apartments? "No, the whole street." Then he zoomed off into the distance.

4

This much we know: Amid the carnage in Douma on April 7, a single horrific incident unfolded in which several dozen civilians, many of them children, were killed. It happened exactly where that young local had taken me on the back of his motorbike. When I forwarded Bellingcat's Eliot Higgins a short iPhone video I'd shot at the location he recognized it as the same street, and the same apartment block, where several vehicles full of Russian military police had arrived on April 9 in response to claims of a chemical attack.²⁹ Bilal Abu Salah, a Douma Revolution cameraperson who'd shot footage from the apartment block with the dead people

²⁹ "That's definitely the same street as the chlorine attack, the balcony with a cylinder in it. The entrance is on the left at 7 seconds in." Email from Eliot Higgins to the author, 21 July 2018.

that evening, recognized it as the same building.³⁰ It was also the place, it turns out, where reporters from CBS News and the Swedish channel TV4 were taken days after the attack when they, like me, traveled to Douma with the Syrian Ministry of Information and struck out on their own in search of the attack site.³¹ Together with a survivor called Nasser Hanan who'd lost most of his family to the attack, the CBS journalist was escorted to the top of the building to be shown a yellow gas canister, whose location looked identical to the one that the activists had recorded a week earlier.³² That canister, its nose neatly wedged into a balcony roof, would become Douma's smoking gun.

The apartment building was also one of five locations the OPCW inspectors visited later in April. The Saada bakery, allegedly the site of a key chemical attack earlier on April 7, was not in the same area of Douma as either canister and the OPCW inspectors did not stop there.³³ Its early identification by the VDC as a key chemical

³⁰ Phone call via new media with activist calling him Bilal Abo-Salah, 18 July 2018, the first of four such conversations.

³¹ Benjamin Decker of the Information Disorder Lab at the Shorenstein Center, Harvard University used visual smarts and geo-location techniques to work out that the video I brought back was taken at the same place that the other reporters had visited. His visual notes are as follows:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QCPj5nUwkg> (Al Jazeera Video, taken by a local activist) - April 9
Features Russians
Matches same location as your video
Window gratings
Door opening
Missing tiles to the left of the door frame.

Translated into English, the activist is saying: "They commit a massacre and then they come and observe the victims as if they don't know who committed this...this is the place where the rocket dropped and this is the neighbourhood in which more than forty victims fell because of poisonous gases used by the Syrian army and its allies on Douma City in Eastern Ghouta."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFKkTwa0TBM> (Local activist Shadi Abdullah vid)- April 9, 2018
Features Russians
Matches same location as your video
Window grating
Red pole

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2m_gpBch0Fs&feature=youtu.be&t=41s (CBS vid)
Window gratings
Door opening
CBS video matches the same 4-story building featured in the Al Jazeera video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDey9vvPmlM&feature=youtu.be> (Swedish TV4 Nyheterna)
0:56 matches the back alley identified in your video at 0:26

³² "We couldn't breathe: Inside Douma, Syria, the site of apparent chemical attack." *CBS News*, 16 April, 2018. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-inside-douma-the-site-of-apparent-chemical-attack-2018-04-16>. Accessed 13 November 2018.

³³ The Saada bakery is 1200 feet away from the balcony cannister, and 1900 feet away from the bed cannister. GPS data from Benjamin Decker of the Shorenstein Center, using OPCW co-ordinates and data from the VDC.

attack site with many dead was a mistake, the result of local propaganda and the fog of war. While chlorine had been dropped at 4 p.m. near the bakery and had caused some breathing problems, according to the VDC's then-regional manager, nobody died as a result of chemicals there. The manager confirmed to me that the figure of 25 casualties, including many dead, in that attack was wrong; those deaths had been caused by shelling, not toxic gases.³⁴ The story of what happened at the apartment building was also convoluted. The testimony of Nasser Hanan, one of the few survivors who was in the house when the attack happened, only added to the confusion. According to him, the inhabitants of that apartment block, like most civilians in Douma, had been cowering in the basement around 7 p.m. when the attack happened. "The women and children were sitting in here," he told the Swedish television reporter Stefan Borg, pointing to dank concrete rooms cushioned with blankets, "and boys and men over here."³⁵ But Fadi Abdullah, who arrived at the building between 8:30 p.m. and 9:15 p.m. and says he was the first media activist on the scene, found bodies on the ground floor, the first floor, and in the stairwells. The people he'd seen, he maintained, hadn't seemed like they'd ever been in any basement; they hadn't seemed to be running anywhere. It was as if they'd been killed on the spot.

It appears to have been an honest misunderstanding on Abdullah's part. Two other camera people who'd arrived in the same place shortly afterward told me, in separate phone conversations from Northern Syria, that their best guess was that the victims had taken refuge from the intense shelling in a cellar or basement when the attack happened and had run frantically upstairs to escape — unaware that that's exactly where the bomb happened to be. Both agreed that most of the bodies they had seen were on the ground floor and first floor, with about four lying in front of the building; many were gathered around the kitchen and the bathroom. All three camera people agreed, like the young man who had driven me there on his motorbike, that the smell had been bad and caused them sharp chest pains. "The victims were only in that building," said one cameraperson, Emad Aldin, "but the whole street could smell it."³⁶ None had felt safe enough to spend any time in the upper floors of the apartment block because of the smell, the dead bodies and the threat from continued shelling. Some, however, did take pictures of the "balcony"

³⁴ Phone conversation via new media with VDC former regional official and Ghouta Office manager, name withheld, 4 November 2018.

³⁵ "My throat hurts: Swedish news team in building of suspected gas attack in Syria", *TV4* (Sweden), 18 April 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDey9vvPmlM&feature=youtu.be>. Accessed 10 February 2019.

³⁶ Phone conversation via new media with Emad Aldin in Northern Syria, 25 September 2018, and follow-up phone calls.

canister against the night sky from a room directly downstairs, where it seemed white rather than yellow. Higgins and Forensic Architecture, a research organization that examines the built environment as evidence in cases of human rights violations, have argued, convincingly to the weapons specialists I spoke with, that this was due to a coating of frost, best explained as an “auto-refrigeration” effect that occurs when liquid chlorine cools. The canister also had wheels to ease its departure from a helicopter and fins to give it ballast on its way down.³⁷

Other things, however, required much more explanation. “Suddenly we heard a sound like the valve of a gas cylinder being opened,” the survivor Hanan told Borg, the Swedish journalist. What was not included in either Borg’s TV4 package or the CBS broadcast was that Hanan was, at least publicly, blaming the Islamist rebels for the attack — and the White Helmets for not coming to the victims’ aid sooner.³⁸ Surrounded by minders from the Syrian Ministry of Information and possible secret police, he could scarcely have blamed the Syrian army for a controversial chemical weapons attack, but viewers might have liked to know what he was saying all the same. Then there was the chain of events put forth in Hanan’s testimony. In the basement with the rest of his family and others, he immediately ran outside to get help, where he grew dizzy and short of breath. Almost everyone else ran back inside, and some headed in the direction of the bathroom to wash off the toxic chemicals. “The ones who ran back inside died at once,” he told Borg. But why would anyone run back into a building full of toxic gas?

Not everyone, even those with opposition sympathies, agreed that this had been a chlorine attack. Two months after the event, one opposition reporter working with a team inside Syria, who spoke to me anonymously for fear of jeopardizing his relationship with other rebel outfits, said that while he believed that chlorine had been dropped just before 4 p.m. that day by Syrian army helicopters and had caused some breathing problems among children near the bakery (confirming the VDC’s view that chlorine had been dropped there), his best guess was that the deaths at the apartment building had been the result of smoke inhalation — the tragic

³⁷ On frosting and auto-refrigeration, see website Bellingcat.com, “All The Pieces Matter: Syria’s Chlorine Bombs and the Douma Chemical Attack”, 29 April 2018.

<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/04/29/pieces-matter-syrias-chlorine-bombs-douma-chemical-attack>. Accessed 13 November 2018. Also see Malachy Browne et al., “One Building, one bomb; how Assad gassed his own people”, *New York Times* video investigation, 25 June 2018. See <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/25/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-attack-douma.html>. Accessed 13 November 2018.

³⁸ Phone call with the Swedish journalist Stefan Borg, 2 October 2018. “The rebels were responsible, that’s what Nasser said.” Borg gave a fuller account of Nasser’s testimony in a CNN interview afterwards. Read the transcript here: <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1804/19/ctw.01.html>

consequence of cloying war-zone dust and several dozen people who'd unwittingly found themselves trapped in a basement. His thinking, he told me, was shaped by suspicions about the agenda of the White Helmets and their Western backers, as well as both their and Douma Revolution's close relationship with Islamists on the ground. Noting the giant gas masks worn by activists days after the attacks, which didn't always feel necessary, he complained that "this is all a huge game."³⁹

The imperative to grab the fleeting attention of an international audience certainly seems to have influenced the presentation of the evidence. In the videos and photos that appeared that evening, most analysts and observers agree that there were some signs that the bodies and gas canisters had been moved or tampered with after the event for maximum impact. The Syrian media activists who'd arrived at the apartment block with the dead people weren't the first to arrive on the scene; they'd heard about the deaths from White Helmet workers and doctors at the hospital. When I asked Fadi Abdullah whether he thought the bodies might have been moved around before he arrived, he told me that he'd asked the civil defense crews the same question. They'd told him that they'd only moved the bodies on the stairwells, and the only reason they'd moved anyone was that they suspected some of the victims might still be alive.

Then there was the position of the gas canisters, which seemed to some a little too neat. An investigation by Forensic Architecture, published last June, found that both gas canisters appear to have been rotated, turned, or moved since they had fallen — and that the one on the bed, whose valve remained more or less intact, looked particularly implausible unless it had been moved after the drop. "We have no idea who interfered with the evidence," Forensic Architecture's Eyal Weizman told me. "But we are close to certain that in both sites the location of the canisters when photographed is not their original fall position."⁴⁰

No one I spoke to in Syria seemed to know why the canisters might have been moved around or tampered with; most of the activists from Douma Revolution flatly denied

³⁹ Name and details withheld at the request of source.

⁴⁰ See "Chlorine Gas Attacks in Douma", Forensic Architecture investigation in collaboration with the New York Times, 25 June 2018. <https://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/douma-chemical-attacks>, evidence of moving or tampering at 5.14 minutes and 7.28 minutes. Accessed 13 November 2018. "We have no idea who interfered with the evidence, but we are close to certain that in both sites the location of the canisters when photographed is not their original fall position." Email to the author from Eyal Weizman of Forensic Architecture, 20 July 2018. The New York Times video report also drew on work by Eliot Higgins from Bellingcat. See Malachy Browne et al., "One Building, one bomb; how Assad gassed his own people", *New York Times* video investigation, 25 June 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/25/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-attack-douma.html>. Accessed 13 November 2018.

it. Most likely they had been rotated or moved short distances for safety reasons, to gather urgent evidence for the cameras, or to encourage greater emotive effect. But if they were moved, the result was self-defeating; it stoked suspicions that they'd been staged to cast blame on the Syrian government.

One former OPCW inspector who's worked on Syria cases was also unimpressed by the location of the canisters. Launched from a Syrian air force helicopter thousands of meters up, he told me, a gas canister like the one on the balcony would ordinarily have fallen right through the concrete roof and not landed so neatly — puncturing it with its nozzle but not falling through. It was also unlikely to have made a hole in the concrete as big as that shown, he said, and the canister valve was unlikely to have snapped off so neatly without the benefit of a detonator. It was possible that a concrete and wire mesh make-up of the roof allowed for a kind of ricochet effect which allowed the canister to spring back up, according to the former OPCW inspector, but not likely. "A lot of stars would have to align," he felt, to give rise to that kind of evidence on the ground. The canister on the bed from an entry point in the roof several meters away looked even more implausible. His best guess, on balance? "This was a set-up rather than an actual aerial attack."⁴¹

But suspicions that the canisters had been moved didn't lead the former OPCW official to conclude that there hadn't been a chemical attack by Syrian military aircraft. In fact, given the dozens dead, which didn't fit with the usual toll of injuries from breathing difficulties and vomiting that result from a Syrian chlorine bomb, and that the victims had apparently dropped unconscious on the spot, he thought it possible that the Syrian air force had used another more murderous poison, one that hadn't been captured in the OPCW report. But for camerapeople desperate to show they had the goods and get the world on their side, he guessed, those videos of gas canisters and outsized gas masks made "compelling images." The temptation, he said, is to "bring your own munition in." He'd seen such staging himself, the former OPCW official confided. In an infamous attack on an aid convoy on the outskirts of Aleppo in September 2016, which killed 14 civilians, he concluded that pieces of alleged photographic evidence had very likely been introduced or faked. In addition, he maintained, "some opposition witnesses had clearly been coached." Ultimately, it didn't matter, the official said; six months later the United Nations had rightly declared the Syrian government responsible. It was just "media ops," he said; the activists had simply been concerned to get their narrative out as quickly and forcefully as they could.

⁴¹ Name and details withheld at the request of source.

In Douma, the position of the Russian authorities from the outset was that the chemical attack was a *mise en scène* — a total When the gas canisters took center stage, the Russian government didn't try to conceal that evidence; instead, it supplied its own version of the story. Shortly after the opposition media activists had departed, a crew from the Russian TV channel Zvezda, run by the Russian Ministry of Defence, arrived in Douma to declare that that the entire balcony scene had been staged as a “provocation.” The intactness of the canister, coupled with the fact that it had punctured but not fallen through the roof, were deemed wholly inconsistent with such a huge drop from the sky of such a fast-moving, weighty object. A rebel lab was discovered with a similar yellow gas canister and other sinister-looking bottles of chemicals, which could have been used for the deception. A neighbor, who'd complained on the CBS package of being enveloped by what he thought was chlorine gas, now turned up to decry all the talk of chemical weapons as needless panic. “It was clear that there was no chemical substance,” he now appeared to say, via Russian dubbing. “For example, I don't have any issues with my health. We don't exclude the fact that some people were brought here on purpose to stage this theater play.”⁴²

The TV crew, embedded with the Russian military, then moved to the other site, where the second yellow canister still lay snugly on a bed. It was a scene “well-known to the entire world,” the reporter noted, because of the gas masks worn by the activists. A pudgy, bespectacled Russian chemist wearing full military uniform and a green hard hat was called upon to demonstrate that the distance between the hole in the roof and the bed — and the general tidiness of a room, which had just received a gas canister from several thousands of meters up — made the whole thing fishy in the extreme. “The authors of this fabrication,” according to the military chemist, “obviously carried the canister in from the street, as can be seen from the shards and traces on the tile.” (In fact, the footage showed no obvious traces or track marks, only pieces of broken tile that looked like normal wear and tear.) As for the canister itself,

⁴² See the undated Svezda report at .46 seconds.

<https://mp4zvezda.cdnvideo.ru/mp4/ixh5q7j0000t7hnje7u13ci5300.mp4>. Accessed 13 November 2018. Another version of the same report, this time with an accompanying article and dated 26 April 2018, can be found in this article on the same channel and website by Alexander Peshkov, “In Bed with Chlorine”, *Radio Star*, 26 April 2018. https://m.tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/201804261427-lic2.htm. Accessed 13 November 2018. For more information on Zvezda, see this Wikipedia entry: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zvezda_\(TV_channel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zvezda_(TV_channel)) Compare the CBS report at .50 seconds, where the same man can be heard to say, in Arabic: “all of a sudden there was a gas strike...it smelled like chlorine so we went down to help the children.” “We couldn't breathe: Inside Douma, Syria, the site of apparent chemical attack.” *CBS News*, 16 April, 2018. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-inside-douma-the-site-of-apparent-chemical-attack-2018-04-16>. Accessed 13 November 2018.

“the valve is not ripped off — just slightly opened so that it leaks or lets the gas out.” These facts, concluded the reporter, “point to the incident being staged by persons working on the orders of people aiming to destabilize the situation in the region.” The owner of the apartment was shown feeding the chickens he kept there, with the gas canister still on display. “And the chickens? The chickens are making eggs as they did before.”⁴³

The Russians, by cutting back and forth between the two different gas canisters, had made it look like the feeding chickens rendered ridiculous the claim that this was the “epicenter of an explosion which, according to the White Helmets, killed hundreds of people.” But the fact that the valve on the bed canister was almost intact, and the one on the balcony wasn’t, was perfectly consistent with the original messages of the camerapeople that the latter had caused many people to die, while the former hadn’t.⁴⁴ The angle of the Russian footage was also selective. Many observers, for example, struggled to believe that the hole in the roof aligned with the bed canister, because it seemed to be at the other end of the room. Even Fadi Abdullah, who’d seen the canister in situ, was under the impression that it had arrived through a nearby window rather than the roof. But several unpublished videos of the bed canister sent to me by Abu Salah, at higher definition and over a range of angles, make it easier to see how the canister could have fallen from the roof onto the bed if it descended at an angle from the sky.

5

Among those experts, reporters, and obsessives who chronicle the gory litany of improvised munitions in use on battlefield Syria, the Syrian government is generally acknowledged to have been dropping chlorine gas bombs for some time. In February 2018 OPCW inspectors found that chlorine had “likely” been used in an attack on a rebel-held city in Northern Syria that caused several people to suffer breathing

⁴³ See the undated, untitled Svezda report at .46 seconds.

<https://mp4zvezda.cdnvideo.ru/mp4/ixh5q7j0000t7hnje7u13ci5300.mp4>. As before, another version of the same report, this time with an accompanying article and dated 26 April 2018, can be found in this article on the same website by Alexander Peshkov, “In Bed with Chlorine”, *Radio Star*, 26 April 2018. https://m.tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/201804261427-lic2.htm. Accessed 13 November 2018.

⁴⁴ In his initial video from the house with the bed canister, wearing a gas mask, Bilal Abo-Salah says that “this rocket, after it fell in this area, did not explode, however it did release gas.” His entire speech, which I translated from the Arabic, makes it clear that, at least from his perspective, the deaths from gas happened elsewhere.

<https://twitter.com/1BilalAbuSalah/status/982956657624911873>

difficulties, but no deaths.⁴⁵ The same Syrian human rights activist who'd been skeptical that the April 7 fatalities had been caused by chemicals told me that between February 18 and March 30, he'd catalogued a number of incidents in which the Syrian air force had dropped canisters filled with chlorine from helicopters in an effort to force out civilians and Islamist rebels. It had done the same in Douma, he said, "not to kill anyone but to scare people, to have them put pressure on Jaish al-Islam to leave."⁴⁶

That dropping chlorine gas canisters might be a terror weapon and not a "kill" weapon makes sense. Sarin is a colorless, odorless liquid that often kills its victims even before they know they've been attacked.

That dropping chlorine gas canisters might be a terror weapon and not a "kill" weapon makes sense. Unlike Sarin, which is a colorless, odorless liquid that often kills its victims even before they know they've been attacked, chlorine, at least as it's been used in improvised munitions in Syria, doesn't usually kill; its victims can smell, see, and sometimes even hear it coming, and they run as fast as they can in the other direction. If the attack on April 7 had employed sarin — and the OPCW inspectors who visited didn't find any evidence that it had — it would explain why the dead were so quickly enveloped by the fumes that they looked like they'd collapsed on the spot. At least as it's been used in improvised munitions in Syria, however, chlorine doesn't usually kill; its victims can smell, see, and sometimes even hear it coming, and they run as fast as they can in the other direction. Many Syrians living in rebel-held areas, prepped by rebels or aid workers, know that chlorine is denser than air and quickly sinks, which is why it might find its way so easily from the roof down to the basement. The presence of chlorine might also explain something Abu Salah, the Douma Revolution cameraperson, had told me. The apartment attack site is only 150 meters from the huge tunnel I'd seen by the emergency medical ward and close to an entrance to that tunnel.⁴⁷ The toxic gases, he said, "leaked to the main medical center via the tunnel, which contained hundreds of families fleeing the shelling."

⁴⁵ Mike Corder, "Watchdog: Chlorine used in Syrian town of Saraqeb", *Associated Press*, 16 May 2018. <https://apnews.com/ff954af84d984fb4be647a568457a3fb>. Accessed 13 November 2018. The OPCW does not apportion blame, and its investigation was complicated by an inability to reach the attack site in Saraqeb. All the same, its inspectors were able to determine, "chlorine was released from cylinders by mechanical impact" in an incident in early February 2018.

⁴⁶ Name and details withheld.

⁴⁷ I know it is a hundred fifty metres away thanks to mapping of the OPCW's GPS locations, courtesy of Benjamin Decker of the Information Disorder Lab at the Shorenstein Center.

The trajectory taken by chlorine gas and its cloying visibility might also explain why, according to Nasser Hanan, most of his family had run back inside the building to their deaths. When I showed videos of the canisters to Theodore Postol in Boston, he was immediately certain that both had been launched from the sky by the Syrian military and that any “brouhaha” from the Russians to the contrary could be safely ignored. Postol, professor emeritus of Science, Technology, and National Security Policy at MIT, is a controversial figure in Syria analysis. Earlier in the conflict his work querying accounts from the OPCW and the UN about the use of sarin in two infamous gas attacks made him deeply unpopular among many Syria analysts, including Higgins, who felt that his analysis wrongly let Assad off the hook for war crimes.

Postol, however, has many years of experience analyzing munitions, including the relative efficacy of Saddam Hussein’s SCUD missiles and U.S. Patriot anti-missiles during the first Gulf War. More recently, together with his late colleague Richard Lloyd, he’s devoted considerable attention to the development of improvised munitions in Syria, including chlorine canister bombs. When I showed him the Douma footage, he immediately concurred with the analysis of internet investigators like Higgins, with whom he often ferociously disagrees. The canister, he reckoned, would have weighed around 250 pounds and carried about 120 kilos of chlorine. But it landed in an entirely unexpected way. Since the concrete-and-steel-mesh roof wasn’t very strong, the bomb punched a hole in the ceiling. The effect was as if the nose of the canister had been deliberately rammed into the external wall, so as to point gas directly into the room below, creating a gas chamber.⁴⁸

That room would have filled with chlorine in one or two minutes. Drawing on Forensic Architecture’s modeling of the building onto which it fell, Postol estimated that the chlorine gas would have poured out into the upper floor at a magnitude several hundred times higher than a lethal dose, its density much greater because the release occurred in an enclosed space. As it made its way down into the two floors below, its density would have decreased, but still would have been much more than enough for a lethal dose.

When it filled the building, the chlorine would have spilled out via open windows and doors and then drifted along the street, like a thick fog, at much lower concentrations. As it sank through the building, the residents hunkered down in the

⁴⁸ Face-to-face interview with Theodore Postol in Cambridge, Massachusetts on 5 October 2018, followed by two follow-up phone calls.

basement would have smelled it too. Many likely ran headfirst onto the street, only to be confronted by a chlorine gas cloud forming all around them. Instinct and training likely kicked in; since chlorine is thicker than air, the instructions they'd been given would have been to head for the roof. Under most circumstances, this would have been excellent advice, like the injunction to workers at the World Trade Center on 9/11 to stay put at their desks, but in this case, it failed the residents of Douma. As they ran back upward through the building, they'd have been rendered unconscious very quickly and dead within minutes. Delivered at that kind of dosage — thousands of milligrams per cubic meter — chlorine could easily have caused the frothing at the mouth, skin burns, and damaged corneas observed by medical workers, as well as the horrible smell and breathing difficulties of which residents complained. It also makes sense of what the motorbike rider had told me: that the whole street had been affected by the foul odor. To panic and terrorize the population was, after all, what this was for.

The murderous result, concluded Postol, was “a very peculiar set of circumstances” and a terrible twist of fate. If the building had had been larger with a firmer roof, the balcony canister would probably not have fallen through; even if it had broken open and begun dispersing its payload, the chlorine would have wafted off into the open air and likely not injured anyone. If the roof had been even weaker and the canister had fallen right through onto the third floor, its valve might not have opened at all, like the one on the bed. But because of the way the canister punctured the concrete, its valve snapped so as to spew the contents directly into the enclosed space below. A lot of stars would have had to align for something like this to happen, just as the former OPCW inspector had said. But in this case, they did.

If chlorine gas canisters killed all those people in the apartment building on April 7, what do we make of Anas Sobheha, the nurse I met at that makeshift emergency ward in Douma, who told me that he'd seen no evidence of a chemical attack? What's clear is that Douma remains a fearful, dangerous place. When I visited, its citizens appeared to be under a kind of quarantine, suspected of harboring “terrorist cells” and unable to leave; when I suggested to Sobheha that we meet in central Damascus he told me that simply wasn't possible. I did, however, discreetly arrange another meeting with a 28-year-old Syrian soldier named Hassan, who I'd met that day in Douma.

Over a drink in Central Damascus, I'd thought Hassan might tell me something about the assault on Douma, but he was tight-lipped and a little nervous. I soon

found out why. Hassan wasn't a regular soldier at all but a junior *mukhabarat* with one the most feared of Syria's secret police fiefs, *Jawiya* — the Air Force Intelligence Service, which runs a secretive network of political prisons in which many oppositionists, rebels, and ordinary civilians have been tortured or disappeared. He was about 900 meters away from Douma in the final days of the fighting, he told me, and had arrived in the city just hours after the rebels agreed to leave. As might be expected from someone who works for the Syrian intelligence apparatus, he couldn't believe that the army would have used chemical weapons. "The Syrian army have made some mistakes," he conceded, "but the rebels have made bigger mistakes." I asked him what it was like to serve in Douma, and he told me that some of the locals had been very supportive, helping him "catch" some remaining terrorists. All the same, he and his company had been ordered by their military superiors to leave. "We were told to be good to the people and to be polite, but some are scared of us."

Was Sobheha lying to me because he was scared? I don't think so. He wouldn't necessarily have seen the immediate casualties from the apartment building because they were all dead. Those who did make their way to the hospital were mostly suffering from minor breathing difficulties, or they'd panicked into thinking that they'd suffered a chemical attack. Likewise, the young Hassan Diab, who the Russian government produced at the press conference at The Hague. While Hassan was shaken up and likely appearing under duress, he's clearly the same boy who appeared in the hospital video from April 7, and he seemed unaffected by exposure to chemicals at the press conference. What unfolded at the hospital appears to have been largely a result of panic and propaganda, spurred by Syrian army chlorine and by activist camerapeople who knew how sensitive the use of chemical weapons is to the United States and the international community. Given the fall of Douma to the Syrian army and the Trump administration's cruise missile strikes against Syrian army bases and research facilities, some might say, both strategies worked.

6

The first draft of history no longer waits for tomorrow's newspaper. Instead, it's tapped out in a hurry on new media and social media. Investigative reporting used to be about breaking the silence by polishing up uncomfortable truths and presenting them to the public. Now it's also about breaking through the noise of electronic

information in a climate thick with propaganda, conspiracy theories and half-truths – to coin the term of the moment, with fake news.

Fake news is not a very useful category; how it's thrown around largely depends on whose ox is being gored. A better way forward might be to talk about bad information. If we define it narrowly as disinformation, or “information which is false and deliberately created to harm”,⁴⁹ it's now too narrow to capture what we want it to address. Organised lying can and does happen, especially in wartime. From the canard about raped Belgian nuns in World War I to the howler about babies thrown from incubators in Kuwait which helped justify the first war in Iraq, as Philip Knightley pointed out in his magisterial survey of modern military propaganda, truth is often the first casualty of war.⁵⁰ It happens in Syria too. In the Summer of 2012, in a refugee camp on the Syrian Turkish border, two different groups of children arrived giggling to show me a horrible video in which two unfortunate men were being horribly decapitated in turn with a chain-saw by a man shouting “Say Bashar [al-Assad] is your God.” It took a few minutes googling to work out that the video was a dubbed import from Mexico, where it showed the horrific execution of several members of one drug cartel. It didn't stop it being repeated as good coin in several major newspapers.⁵¹ A few years later I spent many months investigating one most famous stories from Syria's early uprising, about a prominent revolutionary poet and singer called Ibrahim Qashoush who'd taken to the streets of Hama to lead the revolt there - and who'd soon been found dead in the local river, his throat and vocal chords allegedly cut by forces loyal to the Syrian state. The legend of Ibrahim Qashoush quickly became one of the most defining stories of Syria's early rebellion. Everyone from the BBC to CNN to Associated Press faithfully reported it. Barbara Walters used it to embarrass Bashar al-Assad in her famous interview with him; a Syrian American composer even made an orchestral symphony in an act of posthumous tribute to Ibrahim Qashoush. But not only was it not true, I discovered in an investigation for GQ magazine, but the reality was something close to the opposite of that which was published. The real courageous revolutionary singer Abdulrahman Farhood was alive and well and hiding out in Europe, where I spent

⁴⁹ Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, *Information Disorder: Towards an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy-making* 2017, (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2017).

<https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>. Accessed 13 November 2018.

⁵⁰ Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty. The war correspondent as myth-maker from Crimea to Iraq* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

⁵¹ I was one of the first to write about this dubbed video in this piece. James Harkin, “Syria's Spray-Can Revolution”, *The Atlantic* website, 20 November 2012. See <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/syrias-spray-can-revolution/265470>. Accessed 13 November 2018.

time with him and heard him sing. Ibrahim Qashoush, on the other hand, was a low-level security guard with a disability who'd very likely been killed by a prominent Syrian rebel because of suspicions he'd been an informant for the Syrian regime.⁵²

Deliberate lying gets all the attention, but it's relatively rare. Even when it happens, it's perilously difficult to prove an intent to deceive. Most times people just believe their own hype or their own limited perspective, as a result of which they're careless with the truth. Flaky or fallacious facts flow like fountains from underlying ideas and values. Even when they travel in from abroad – as in the most politically egregious kinds of Russian interference identified by Robert Mueller's investigation into the 2016 Presidential Election – these hard-working trolls weren't, for the most part, telling outright falsehoods. Mostly they were picking at existing sores and weaknesses within American society – ramping up Black Lives Matter, for example, stoking already widespread resentments against Hilary Clinton, or puffing up Donald Trump – rather than conjuring up false facts.⁵³ If I'd done no more than interview Anas Sobheha in Douma or watch Hassan Diab at the Russian press conference, I might have come to the conclusion that no chemical weapons attack had taken place. If I'd only read the report from the rebel-supporting VDC, I'd have concluded that this was a Sarin attack. It doesn't mean that either party was telling a deliberate untruth.

Syria might be considered an outlier. Here was such a dangerous and expensive conflict to cover, and so difficult a place to put journalists on the ground. But its murky propaganda wars seem, in retrospect, like a live-fire rehearsal for many of our current concerns about bad information. Faced with tight budgets, it was tempting for outlets to fill in the gaps in their Syria coverage with output served up by others – opposition activists, NGO's, the international human rights industry, thinly educated think-tankers many of whom hadn't been to Syria since the conflict began and who often seemed to be getting their information from Twitter. The result was often a kind of groupthink. When it arrived in Syria, just as would happen later around the 2016 General Election, Russian propaganda took its strength from the

⁵² James Harkin, "The incredible story behind the Syrian protest singer everyone thought was dead", *GQ* UK, January 2017 issue. <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/syria-civil-war>. Accessed 13 November 2018.

⁵³ For more information on the IRS indictments, see, for example, Dan Mangan and Mike Calia, "Special Counsel Mueller: Russians conducted 'information warfare' against US during Election to help Donald Trump win", *CNBC*, 16 February 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/16/russians-indicted-in-special-counsel-robert-muellers-probe.html> Accessed 13 November 2018. For more on the indictments of Russian intelligence officers see Christina Wilkie, "5 Key Takeaways from the latest indictment in Mueller's Russia probe", *CNBC*, 13 July 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/13/5-key-takeaways-from-mueller-indictment-of-russian-election-hackers.html>. Accessed 13 November 2018.

weaknesses and the hypocrisies of this activist mash-up in our mainstream media, because it was – almost by definition – not telling us all of the truth. Having activists on the ground parlaying half-truths is exactly what drives conspiracy-making and rumour-mongering - the same things now being identified as the reasons for our malaise. In a similar way the retrenchments of the media at home – the retreat from local coverage, the evisceration of specialist expertise – has put many editors in a the invidious position of retreating from local, boots-on-the-ground reporting and drawing instead on those who have obvious axes to grind. The mainstream print media is still infinitely better than anything else we have, and streets ahead of the competition. But too often its tips, its frames of reference and its new media come from one digital side.

Would it help to hire more fact-checkers and verification experts? Some people think so, because fact-checking is now big non-profit business. In an industry - the mainstream print media - whose economic fortunes are in wholesale retreat, free-floating fact-checking outfits are one of the few growth areas. They're the new kids on the block: geeks and wonks who make it their business to debunk hoaxes, conspiracy theories and “alternative facts” online. Some are bankrolled by the big tech companies as a clumsy act of penance, others by big foundations who think it might help restore the credibility of journalism. Stemming the tide of misinformation and disinformation, goes the theory, is one of the few incontrovertible ways to bring reason back to political affairs, to stabilise the ship. At a conference in Europe recently I met a charming former journalist whose fresh purpose, almost certainly with dough from a well-meaning foundation, was to teach fact-checking skills to children.

Let's leave aside the totalitarian echoes of teaching innocents how to recognise insidious “fake news.” Or the fact that schemes to hunt out deliberate disinformation tend to be tone deaf to satire, parody, hyperbole, and downright exaggeration – most of what gives political rhetoric, as well as children's stories, their meaning and power. Most of their output is aimed at the torrent of rumor and idiocy blown in from new media—nefarious Russian trolls, Fox News, and the excitable alt-right, your intemperate President. It's comforting to imagine that “disinformation” is only propagated by our enemies, and that all we have to do is clamp down on and otherwise interrogate their false facts to make things right. Free-floating fact-checking schemes are very easy to weaponize and turn against one enemies - and weaponised they've often become. But fixing the first draft by fact-checking it to death is a grossly technocratic simplification of a real problem. But

fact-checking President Trump, for example, is like strapping a lie-detector on a stand-up comedian. The American President is a conspiracy theorist; facts are not his strong suit. His election and the rise of populism everywhere had little to do with false facts. It spoke to a running sore in Western democracies, a stark and still-widening gulf between elites and the people they claim to represent. Why then, would we imagine that further tinkering with the facts would do any good, and not a good deal more harm?

Amid the ocean of information out there the worry is not so much that people believe everything they read on the internet but that they might end up believing none of it. Good journalism can help with that. But surrendering our ability to check facts to external authorities won't - it will only make the loss of confidence in journalism worse. In its impoverished state and leaning heavily on the output of others, what we publish often comes peppered with partisan half-truths which lack perspective or any broader factual architecture - an understanding of the context in which all this happened, or in which information about how it happened might have come our way. Rather than lying because he was scared, I'm beginning to think, Anas Sobheha might have just been frustrated with the narrow attention span of visiting journalists. According to him, 270 people, both civilians and fighters, had died over two days of heavy, unrelenting shelling by the Syrian armed forces. Did anyone care about that? If a 500-pound bomb had collided with the roof of that apartment block near al-Shuhada Square instead of a chlorine canister, it would have punched clean through and landed slap on one of the higher floors. There would have been a tiny delay, only a fraction of a second, while the fuse sensed that it had reached its destination, after which the building would have blown apart and its entire weight fallen downward onto the basement. Everyone hiding there would likely have been buried alive.

What government pummels its citizens with bombs and chlorine to get them to pressure rebels to leave their city? At the same time, Jaish Al-Islam was sending volleys of improvised rockets into Damascus and snatching activists and members of religious minorities for ransom or to be disappeared. It's between these two violent truths that the real story of the Syrian conflict begins to emerge — not in a bewildering collage of images sent from a war zone, designed to terrify and outrage.

7

The truth is that there's little journalists can do about crap on the internet; taking aim at "disinformation" is like firing a machine-gun at an unruly flock of birds. What we *can* do is to get our own house in order. Allied to its dwindling economic fortunes and its shorter attention span is a loss in the authority and confidence of journalism as a way to make sense of the world – a problem that surrendering our ability to check facts is only going to make than worse. A modest suggestion. Why not try restoring our authority by doing much less, but with greater depth and context? The result would be a slower kind of journalism which relies on the accumulation of detail and reaches for underlying truths. It might even return us to the old-fashioned business of checking our own facts before those of everyone else.

This new approach to journalism is already in the ether;⁵⁴ let's call it a *second draft*. A good second draft will often take its inspiration from the first draft on new and social media; very often it has to, because there are no journalists around. But neither should it be shy or contradicting it, or turning its own shortfalls into the story, or subjecting it to the full force of our investigative armory. When journalism was dropped into huge new media eco-systems like Facebook and Google, the temptation was to borrow from their ways of doing things – and to try to do everything, all the time - rather than teaching them our own. But if there's one thing the convulsions of the last decade have taught us, it's that that doesn't work – either editorially or financially. A better plan would work to rebuild our authority bit by bit, over particular niches and subject areas.⁵⁵ Once expertise is built, unlike clickbait, it's a story which keeps on giving.

In its time of economic need, journalism - and many journalists –have taken refuge in universities. If they don't pay for what we do, went the implicit reasoning, then at least they can pay for what we teach. But what often looks like a defensive manoeuvre can, if we work towards a second draft, becomes a magnificent opportunity to renew the profession. The analysis of new media is a great new

⁵⁴ See, for example, Jill Abramson and Jane Mayer's emphasis on "slow journalism" and "deep reporting" in journalism's future in their 2018 Theodore H. White lecture at the Shorenstein Center. "The Press has never been more vital to the survival of Democracy", text of the annual Theodore H. White lecture 2018, Shorenstein Center. <https://shorensteincenter.org/abramson-mayer>. Accessed 13 November 2018.

⁵⁵ I wrote about this in my book *Niche*. James Harkin, *The Missing Middle, and Why Business Needs to Specialise to Survive* (London: Abacus, 2012). See also the work of the Single Subject News Project at the Shorenstein Center: <https://medium.com/single-subject-news-project/welcome-to-the-single-subject-news-projects-blog-cb6fbcaed2eb>

weapon in the armoury of journalists, but even its proudest advocates would admit it only unfolds over one narrow dimension. It lacks depth and materiality and, just as in Douma, it often raises as many questions than it answers. To guard against it new being weaponized by others a second draft would bring all that new material into a conversation with a much wider range of expertise – engineers and munitions and chemical experts to take a look at what we've been sent, architects to add extra spatial dimensions, techies and psychologists to work out whether we've been duped, linguists to translate, political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists and indigenous reporters to supply rich local nuance, storytellers and film-makers to help us find an audience, even lawyers to push the authorities on our behalf and to make sure we're not going to get sued.

Where could we possibly find all these ingredients in the same place? In a university, of course; one like Harvard, or the London University to which I'm currently attached. The reserve army of intellectual labour in the modern university is unprecedented. A second draft will find willing allies in many of those geeky heroes whose open-source investigation skills have gotten them jobs in the fact-checking industry. But instead of outsourcing our authority to other kinds of experts, it requires us to lead them back into the fold of a new kind of journalism. The great thing about a satisfying second draft is that, much like the iconoclastic podcast *Serial*, it will have more time to concern itself more with process as well as product – giving us the chance to explain things as we go along and retell the story of why independent, sceptical journalism matters.

There are solid arguments, of course, against putting much faith in a second draft. What use is slow-baked journalism when a lie can travel half-way around the world before the truth even manages to get its trousers on? But that depends on what you think the effects of bad information are. Did Americans really vote for the President because someone on Facebook wrote that he had the blessing of the Pope? Did the British people vote for Brexit because a blonde rhetorician promised them three hundred and fifty million pounds a week for their National Health Service if they did? In any case, the causal relationship between rubbish news and bad things happening, everywhere from Myanmar to Syria, is very difficult to prove. That's because new media, just like old media (the sociologist will be able to help here, if we hire one) is usually more of an effect than an underlying cause.

By contrast, it's easy to work out when our political leaders take action on the basis of preliminary evidence which blows in largely from new media. Think of Douma.

The knock-on effects of a second draft might even encourage a slower kind of politics and a less knee-jerk approach to policy-making. If nothing else, it'd make for a great new educational tool.

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